UK'S ONLY ANIME, MANGA AND ASIAN FILM MAGAZINE

NEO

Issue 031 • SPRING '07 • £3.95

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Hotel Dusk
Hellsing
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化石超進化 SPECTROBES

We talk globalism, Pokémon and the Japanese way with producer **Kentaro Hisai**

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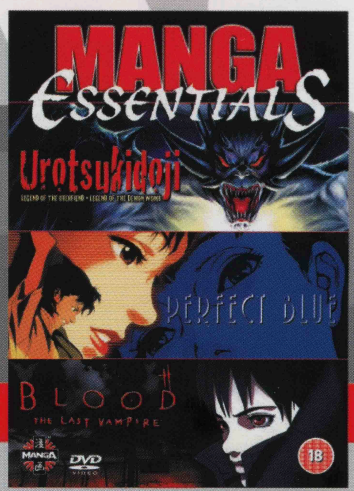

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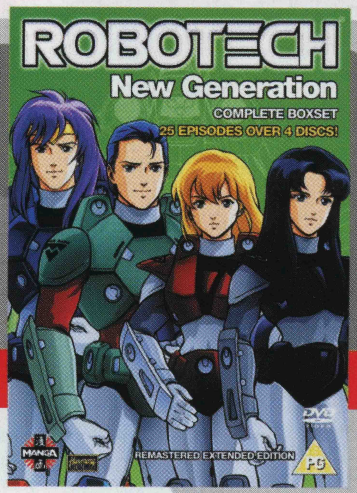

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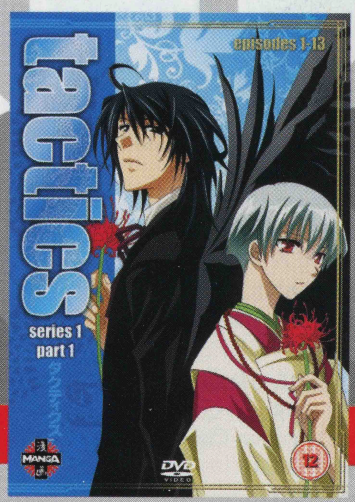

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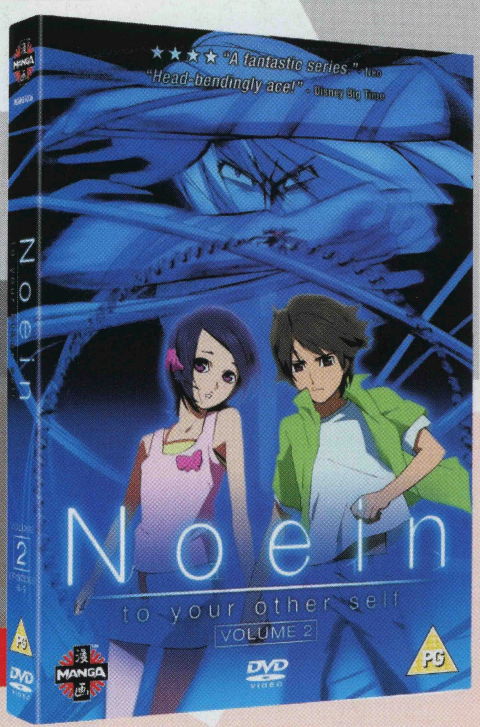

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NEO Contents

THE BIG FEATURES IN NEO THIS MONTH...

WELCOME

to NEO 031!

By the time I get round to writing my editorial for NEO, I've just about finished putting together all the pages for the magazine and the issue starts to finally feel complete. At the same time, I'm rushing around trying to get the new issue sorted out, contacting distributors, freelancers and PR companies to make sure that we can get all of our features, reviews and standing pages finished on time for the next issue's deadline. At the moment, I'm organising the list of features for NEO 032, and making sure that we have images for Helen McCarthy's feature on *Le Chevalier D'Eon*, as well as co-ordinating with a writer in Japan over an interview with a new band. There's never a dull moment working on NEO, and I sincerely hope the same sense of energy, commitment and enthusiasm we have here in the office transmits itself back to you guys – there's nothing the team likes better than to hear something we've written has really got you excited!

This issue, the feature that had me grinning from ear to ear was our interview with Japanese sensations HalCali – the band has been a firm favourite of mine since I first heard Tandem, and actually HalCali Bacon was the first Japanese album I ever bought. If you've never heard their music, check out some of the tracks that Daniel Robson recommends in the feature, which starts on page 036.

One of the most interesting articles to research this month was the *Hotel Dusk* feature on page 050, which involved NEO staff taking a trip to London for a murder mystery evening. (You'll be proud to know our team solved the crime and won a bottle of bubbly each – we're not just pretty faces after all.) At the moment, we're totally in love with Nintendo's fabulous DS console, and we have one to give away on page 051.

As always, please keep your comments coming in to us here at the mag – it's great to hear from you, and you could win a £50 HMV giftcard for your efforts.

Thanks for reading

Gemma

Gemma Cox – Editor

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NEO interviews the producer of the latest gaming sensation to hit the DS
Starts on pg. 006

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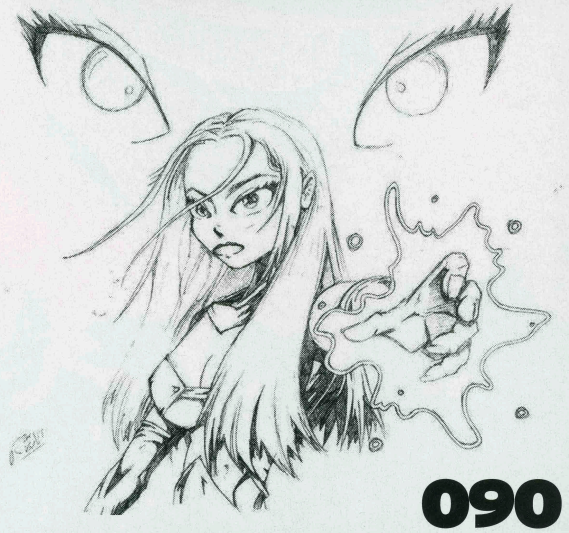

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Disney is pushing the boat out with Spectrobes, a new venture designed to take the world by storm. NEO speaks to the games producer about Pokémon and globalism in an attempt to get to the bottom of this new phenomenon

Chasing the Dream

Will Disney's latest project be a hit with the global gaming audience?

The Disney Way

Spectrobes is Disney's first ever original video game property. The game isn't based on any other Disney book, movie or ride, but already there are plans in place for an anime series based on the game. Several 'webisodes' – short animations which set up the plot of the game – are already floating around online, so we wouldn't be surprised if these form the basis of the new show.

This guy isn't a marauding Viking, it's the old scientist Aldous, who was frozen in time in order to halt the Krawl invasion.

Back in 1996, *Pokémon* reinvented the idea of collecting on a massive scale, involving school children (and many adults) across the globe in a frenzy of 'Gotta Catch 'Em All'. And that motto really has stuck, and become the template for franchise after franchise that has followed in its footsteps. Whilst none have reached the same giddy heights of success as the now legendary series, many have tried, and *Spectrobes* is yet another game attempting to take a big swing at *Pokémon*'s crown.

Of course, as we all know, *Pokémon* didn't invent the collecting genre, but as an archetype you can't go far wrong. The series is based around the concept of collections, comparisons and statistics – all things that fascinate children especially. Naturally, when creating a new gaming franchise, all creators hope to tap into that same seam of raw fascination.

So it's with this in mind that we travelled to Disney's offices in London to talk to Kentaro Hisai, producer of *Spectrobes*, about his new game, *Pokémon*, collecting, and the Japanese way.

First of all we had to ask Hisai about the basic plot of the game. "It's an action RPG," he told us. "The aim is to maintain the peace of the world from the evil Krawl force by putting life into fossils, which evolve into Spectrobes."

The game relies on the DS's touch screen for most of the action. Hisai talks us through the process of finding and evolving a Spectrobe. Using a child Spectrobe, he scans the ground until he finds something buried under the earth. "If you touch it, you are taken to the excavation stage," Hisai tells us. "The size of the drill heads can change and you can use the touch screen to excavate. The fossils are very fragile and you have to take care not to damage them. As you can see, the debris is coming off the screen. You can blow it off by blowing into the microphone. Then you can scan the image with the radar." Hisai chips away at the fossil on the screen, until the game chimes to let him know he's done enough work on the fossil. "As you reach 95% you can pick it up. You take this fossil to the spaceship's facility to wake it up."

Your Spectrobes might start out as cute little babies, but they soon grow into fearsome beasties – good job really, as you have a horde of intergalactic bad guys to fight off.

Them Bones

Hisai takes his Spectrobe fossil back to the spaceship for the next stage in the evolution process. "You actually have to talk to the Spectrobe to wake it up. This way you create a bond between you and the characters. This waking up screen is particularly good as you spend a lot of time on it so you're almost moved by it when it's done." Hisai shows us the finished Spectrobe. "It's just at a child stage, so it's not good enough for fighting. You have to put the Spectrobe into the incubator, and feed it the minerals. Two Spectrobes should be kept in the incubator, so they can form bonds. The power of their combination attack is strengthened through the process. As the Spectrobes go into battle you can gain experience points, very similar to RPGs."

We wondered about the process that was used in the game to bring the Spectrobes to life. Why did the development team pick on fossils in particular?

"The starting point of all the references is what you spend time on when you're a kid – scientific subjects, like fossils or space, cosmos, or even looking after tropical fish – all the kinds of things that kids love, which appeals to everyone," Hisai told us.

The game uses a host of these colourful fossils brought to life, and it's the distinctive designs of these Spectrobes that Disney and Buena Vista games are hoping will hook in the younger generation of gamers. We wanted to know more about who designed the Spectrobes, but Hisai was cagey about revealing too much. "More than 20 Japanese artists were involved in the process. Some of them were very famous, but it's against Disney's policy to reveal their names."

Hisai was able to tell us more about the development process. "We spent about a quarter of the whole process in discussion about the

"More than 20 Japanese artists were involved in the process. Some of them were very famous, but it's against Disney's policy to reveal their names."

Kentaro Hisai

Kentaro Hisai was born in born in 1971 in Nara City, Japan. After studying Visual Communication Design in Kyoto, he joined Konami in 1994 as an artist. Hisai's last big project was a PS2 game called *Remote Control Dandy SF*, although he's also recently worked on the art direction for a series called *Disney Sports*.

Hisai's favourite game of all time was *The Legend Of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* on the N64. "A friend of mine developed it," he told us. "I was so into it, it took me nine hours. The game I'm playing at the moment is by the same person. You race really hard to get to the end of it and along the way you get a sense of what he was aiming at and what he was trying to do with it. There was a lot of information about it at the time, like books, but I didn't read anything about it, I just wanted to be influenced by the game rather than what other people thought about it. But I'm kind of doing the same thing here, so if you like *Spectrobes* you can find out about it faster!"

Kentaro Hisai with his copy of NEO – he's a big fan of *Ah! My Goddess* and thought it was amazing that we'd only just had the UK release of the new series this year.

Every game needs a stern commander to issue orders and generally boss you around. This is him: Commander Grant.

Spectrobes. Actually, my favourite is the red one, Komainu." We quizzed him on his choice, and he showed us a huge chart with the different varieties of Spectrobes laid out, pointing out the adult and child forms of his favourite. "It's a long story. The designers took about three months to come up with the designs. Through the process they came up with the grown up idea. I remember the enormous meeting room we had with many, many designers and all the drawings, and these two were just standing out."

Pokéloving Globalism

There's no way we could have an interview with Kentaro Hisai and not ask him about *Pokémon*. Despite his continued protests in other interviews that the game is not a *Pokémon* clone, the similarities between the two games are obvious. We wondered whether *Pokémon* was in Hisai's mind when designing the game, either as a source of inspiration or possible rival.

"*Pokémon* is highly established and almost like a sacred culture in its own right in Japan. [The elements of] collection cards and monsters were probably an inspiration, but in terms of reference it really wasn't the case at all. It would actually be nice to be rivalled with *Pokémon*!"

NEO wondered what it is about collection games that made them so popular with the international audience. "When you are into things, you are naturally inclined to collect things and you want to be surrounded by the things you like," mused Hisai. "If this is popular only in Japan, it would be a Japanese only phenomenon, but I think it's universal. I just want to collect things."

All this talk of international audiences, plus Disney's involvement with a Japanese games developer to create a distinctly Japanese looking game, got us wondering whether the modern trend of globalism was affecting games in a negative way.

Defending *Spectrobes*, Hisai replied, "It was never a conscious decision to appeal to the general public as such. There's an old Japanese saying that if you try to appeal to everyone, you lose something." Talking of game players individually, he added, "You probably feel more inclined to someone dedicated to something ardently. So basically *Spectrobes* is a thing I like, I'm so fond of it, so that's why I worked so hard to promote it. This is just the simple result, it was never an intention to please the general public as such."

We were still wondering about the game's uniquely Japanese visual style, and quizzed Hisai about why the game uses an anime look.

"I work for Disney, and what makes Disney unique is that they have a very open minded and changeable style, and bring the most suited team of people to work on things they feel strongly about. So *Lilo & Stitch* and *Pocahontas* are very different, as they employed a very different sort of team. For this theme of collecting fossils and evolution, they thought it was more suited for an anime and manga theme."

Card Shark

The game uses a card system along with the touch screen to boost the performance of the Spectrobes in battle. The game comes packaged with a few of these cards, and at the time of the interview the method of obtaining additional cards hadn't yet been finalised. All a player has to do to use the cards is to lay them on top of the screen and use the stylus to touch the card in the correct order. This then unlocks the card's hidden ability. We asked Hisai

Rallen, the hero of the game. You'll spend a lot of time running around as this guy, using your Spectrobe to search out fossils for you to excavate.

化石超進化
SPECTROBES

Some of the Spectrobes' designs are more outlandish than others. This one looks like a reject from *The Village*.

when during the development process that the card game element first occurred to him.

"My thought processes went like this: the playing of the game and collecting cards has something in common, so what if I integrate this collection part of playing games into the process? I don't know exactly when in the process of development this came. But what I wanted to avoid was having to make people buy separate card readers."

We wondered whether there were any elements that Hisai's development team wanted to include in the game but didn't have time for – from the look in his eye we got the impression there was plenty, but Hisai simply laughed and said, "I can't tell you that!"

"This is my first time developing a DS game," he told us. "The DS is a unique device and has a full potential, so I want to work on something different with the DS again. It's not terribly powerful, but you can apply lots of ideas to it."

We wondered whether there were any plans to develop *Spectrobes* for other consoles like the Wii. Hisai smiled and told us, "At this stage I cannot say anything official, but the franchising of *Spectrobes* is one of my dreams, so if it works well, I would love to try that."

From a developer's point of view, we wondered what Hisai thought of this new generation of consoles. "They all have unique features; [there is] something very interesting about these different platforms," Hisai told us, speaking of the PlayStation 3, the Wii and the Xbox 360. "Each has a different audience, the price is different and the target audience is different. So we're living in an era where you can choose whichever platform is suitable for you, as each concept is different." He told us about the possibility of putting *Spectrobes* on another platform. "If we did put this game on another console, we would have to find its unique feature and use that. I've got some things in my mind!"

Spectrobes is without a doubt riding on the surge in popularity of anime and manga across the globe, using tried and tested methods, along with some neat innovative touches, to hook in a new generation of gamers. But is this new venture between developers Jupiter Corp and Buena Vista a recipe for success or disaster? Only time will tell.

"For this theme of collecting fossils and evolution, [Disney] thought it was more suited for an anime and manga theme."

Spectrobing

In a weird blend of archaeology and space travel, *Spectrobes* combines two of the greatest movie heroes, Han Solo and Indiana Jones (both played by Harrison Ford) in one man – Rallen, the hero of the piece. Okay, maybe we're overstating it slightly. Here's the low-down on the plot from Hisai himself.

"Rallen and his partner Jeena detect some kind of weird signal on patrol. As they reach the point where the signal came from, they find an old man named Aldous, who is asleep. When he wakes up, he tells them that the evil force that destroyed his world is reaching their world. This evil force is called Krawl, and is only stopped by the Spectrobes' ability. Spectrobes are like dinosaurs to us – you cannot see their forms, as they are fossils. With the technology Aldous has, you can bring these fossils to life. So Rallen and Jeena begin their adventure to find fossils to protect the world."

Jeena is your hot anime babe companion – she stays inside the spaceship and keeps out of trouble, just like any sensible person would.

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NEO NEWS NETWORK

Sweatdrop's stand was popular as ever, even attracting Naruto to try out his artistic skills.

As usual, the NEO magazine stand had both wit and beauty by the bucket load.

Midlands Expo is a success

Five yearly conventions for MCM Expo

THE MCM EXPO launched its first show outside of London in February, when thousands flocked to the Telford International Centre to take part in what is rapidly becoming one of the most essential anime and manga events in the UK.

The Expo, already famous for its twice yearly shows, is branching out this year with an extra three shows which will test the waters for new attendees. The February show was the first and appeared to NEO to be hugely successful. So successful, in fact, that plans are already in full swing for another, third new Expo at the Telford International centre – this time stretching over the weekend of 15 and 16 September. Visit the event's site at www.mcmexpo.net for more information about special guests, events, tickets prices and location.

The other new show is of course Japan EX London, which is being held on the 14-15 July at the ExCel Centre in London's Docklands. The reaction to this new event will be a good indication of the current state of play in the UK market, as all previous MCM Expo shows have been a mixture of anime, manga, science fiction and cult TV and movies. If the Japan EX show is a success, and the crowds are drawn in by anime and manga, as well as other aspects of Japanese culture, it means great things for the market as a whole – including, of course, NEO readers. If you want to learn more about Japan EX, visit the site at www.japanexlondon.com.

NEO was on hand at February's Telford Expo to sell copies of our new issue 031 a week before it officially hit the shelves. We also had hundreds of free *Final Fantasy XII* win discs to give away, which contained goodies like wallpapers and game soundtracks. We also gave away a copy of the magazine to the legendary Chris Barrie, star of *Red Dwarf*, who no doubt loves NEO as

NEO NUGGETS

Easily edible nuggets o'news!

DOLL LOVE

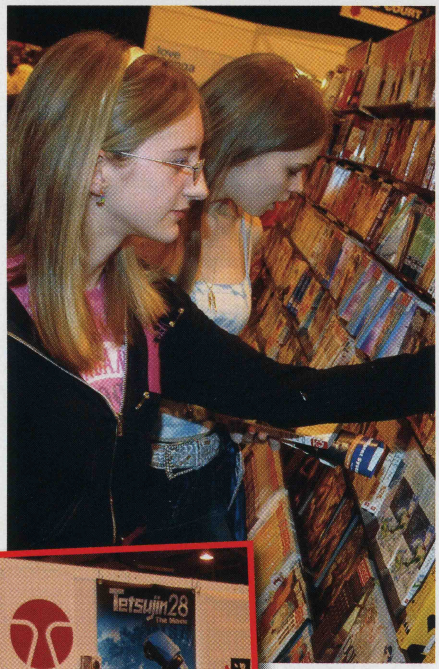
Blow up dolls [called Dutch Wives in Japan] are experiencing a surge in popularity, which has led to some companies starting doll hotels and even doll escort services, the Mainichi reports. The love dolls are heavy and cumbersome, but customers are delighted by their lifelike attributes [the result of years of research], although one customer was unimpressed by the dead, staring eyes. You can buy a doll for as much as £2,600, or rent one for an hour for £22. Ah, romance.

BLACK RICE

Last month it was the delightful concept of bilk – a beer and milk fusion, and this month we have black rice balls. Maybe not as initially off putting as bilk, but black rice is nevertheless an interesting food concept for a nation that prizes the pure white colour of rice extraordinarily highly. In fact, the convenience store chain am pm who came up with idea are suggesting it will one day be everyone's "second favourite rice ball" – surely an indication something ain't right.

ROYALTY WOES

Japanese Empress Michiko has been suffering from what her doctors term "psychological stress". Empress Michiko is reportedly Japan's first 'commoner' to marry an heir to the throne, although we're not sure how common you are if your dad is president of the Nisshin Flour Milling company [see Jonathan Clements' feature on page 032]. Michiko has suffered from bouts of stress in the past, and lost her voice during the 1990s following bad press, according to the BBC's news website.



● Hundreds flocked to the TOKYOPOP stand to browse through the latest titles from the UK's most prolific manga publisher.

● Manga Entertainment and Terratag teamed up to create a stand that oozed with Japanese cool.

much as our biggest fan, Mr. Jonathan Ross does. (Name dropping much?)

Cosplayers were heavy on the ground again, many of them holding an impromptu photo session outside in the main foyer of the centre. As an indication of just how many convention goers were kitted out in cosplay, when the masquerade event was held the show floor practically emptied as the crowds made their way to the stage, either to have their moment of glory or to applaud the efforts of those who came in costume. Our very own Mark Hulmes was on hand at the cosplay masquerade, where Karen Dawson, dressed in a beautifully elaborate Amaterasu costume, won the overall first place prize. Karen, who also goes by the name Fatkraken, has become famous for her gorgeously detailed costumes, and she took the time to come by to the stand to pose with the latest copy of NEO, which had Amaterasu as our cover girl.

If you missed NEO's amazing three issue subscription deal at the Expo in February, get yourself to the ExCeL centre for May's London MCM Expo. More details on the event are available at www.londonexpo.com, and fast track entry tickets (highly recommended) are available for £10.

Hot & Not

HOT

HALCALI

This hip hop duo have always been a favourite at the NEO office since we first heard their debut single Tandem.

MANWHA

With Hollywood remakes of manwha about to hit the States this year, it's time to get into Korean comics.

COOL

ROBOTIC DOCTORS

Japanese researchers have created a tiny medical robot to work inside the body – except it's 2cm in length and attached to a cable. Ouch!

NOT

BLOW UP LOVE DOLLS

Maybe they are nearly as good as the real thing, but as far as we're concerned if they can't make a decent cup of tea, they're pointless.

WAR REFUSAL

So much bad press about 'Comfort Women' during WWII.

Now out from ADV FILMS

NEO NEWS NETWORK

COSPLAY HITS THE HIGH STREET

Naruto extravaganza planned for launch of new boxset

CALLING ALL COSPLAYERS! To celebrate the launch of *Naruto Unleashed Series 2, Part 1*, Manga Entertainment has teamed up with Virgin, NEO, Jetix, Atari and It Came from Japan for a *Naruto* cosplay party.

We want to bring cosplay to the high street for one day and two parties are planned, one for the Virgin Megastore in the Arndale Centre, Manchester and the other for the Virgin Megastore in Oxford Street, London. The event starts at 6pm on Monday 21 May, and there's a free gift for all attendees. Plus, early birds who come kitted out in cosplay will receive an extra special goody bag worth £30 – numbers are strictly limited, so get your headband and your skates on if you want to get your hands on one.

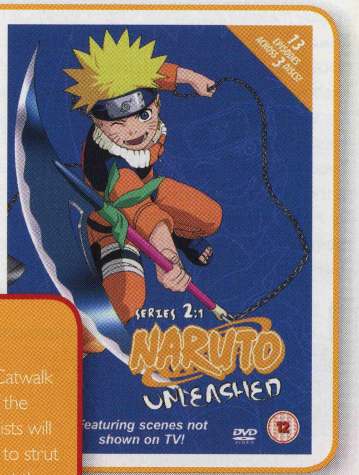
As part of the *Naruto* extravaganza, all types of cosplay are welcome, whether you want to dress up as Naruto himself, or a Klingon… or Mr. Darcy. Whether it's an anime or a TV programme you've modelled yourself on, you're eligible for a goody pack and entry to the Cosplay Catwalk Competition where the cream of British cosplay will be celebrated.

A panel of judges will award prizes and a trophy for the following categories: Best Male and Best Female *Naruto* Cosplay, Best Overall Anime/Manga Cosplay, Best Overall Videogame Cosplay and Best Overall TV/Film Cosplay. The prizes will be supplied by Manga, Atari, Virgin and Jetix, and include video games consoles, DVDs and manga.

"We are really excited to be bringing cosplay to the high street for the first time in simultaneous events in London and Manchester," Jerome Mazandarani of Manga told us. "Many manga and anime fans often complain that they don't get enough events in the north, so we thought we'd bring the show to them. Manga and Virgin feel that the *Naruto* Cosplay Party is an excellent opportunity to expose the wider public to the joys of cosplay, which has become such a vital part of the whole anime and manga experience." Visit www.manga.co.uk for more info.

Naruto Returns

Naruto Unleashed continues with the release of part one of series two on 21 May. The boxset is being released as a triple disc with a limited edition slipcover, and as part of the *Naruto* Cosplay Party, Virgin are offering fans a bonus limited edition *Naruto* keychain, thanks to Viz Media and GE Animation. This is only available from Virgin and numbers are limited.



Cosplay Contest

Any cosplayers who want to take part in the Cosplay Catwalk are invited to register on arrival at the Cosplay Desk of the London and Manchester Megastores. A number of finalists will be selected from those who have registered and asked to strut their stuff on the catwalk stage. The judges will then select the winners, and prizes will be awarded on the day. Competition winners will appear in the following issue of NEO!

Virgin megastores
virginmegastores.co.uk

OTAKU OUTTAKES

Oh Director, Where Art Thou?

DAVID WEST HAS A LOOK AT WHAT HONG KONG'S BIG NAMES ARE WORKING ON

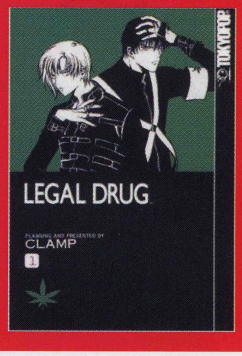
John Woo's *The Battle of Red Cliff* has become the most expensive movie in Chinese film history before it has even started shooting. Originally budgeted at £26 million, the revised budget has been announced at £40 million, more than double the previous record holder, Zhang Yimou's *Curse of the Golden Flower*. The story is based on a real battle from 208 AD which was featured in the epic Chinese novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* by Luo Guanzhong. At one point Andy Lau was linked to Woo's film, but he's no longer on the project. At time of press, the confirmed cast includes You Yong, Zhang Fengyi (*The Emperor and the Assassin*) and Chang Chen (*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*) as the three rival warlords whose armies fought the battle. However, the big names are the actors playing the other characters involved in the war. Tony Leung will play an adviser to one warlord, while Chow Yun Fat will play an army general. Taiwanese former supermodel Lin Chi-Ling will play Chow's wife in her motion picture debut. There will be two finished versions of the finished project. In Asia, the film will be released in two parts, each two hours long, but for the west it will be edited down to a single two and a half hour movie.

Meanwhile, Johnny To has replaced John Woo to direct the remake of Jean-Pierre Melville's thriller *Le Cercle Rouge*, from 1970. Produced by France's Studio Canal, this will be To's first English language production and presumably the studio is hoping to launch To as an international filmmaker akin to Woo. To is nothing if not busy. He produced *Eye In The Sky*, the directorial debut of Yau Nai-hoi, who wrote the screenplay for many of To's movies, including *Election* and *Throw Down*. In addition, To is reported to be working on a series of five films based on his 2003 hit *PTU*, under the title *Tactical Unit*. The first will get a theatrical release in Hong Kong, while the other four will go straight to DVD. Original *PTU* stars Simon Yam, Lam Suet and Maggie Siu are set to return in the series

NEO MOST WANTED MANGA

Legal Drug

A new CLAMP manga? Well, sign us up. This one's about two pharmacists with a sideline in unusual errands. Volume one of the series is out much later in the year from TOKYOPOP.



THE BADDEST OF THE BAD ARE BACK!

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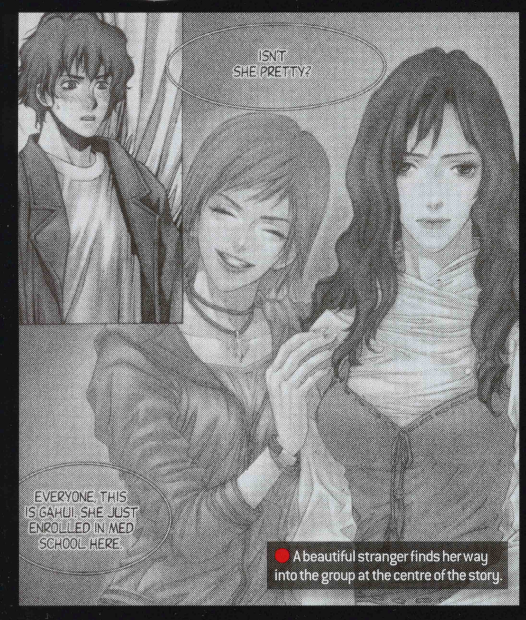
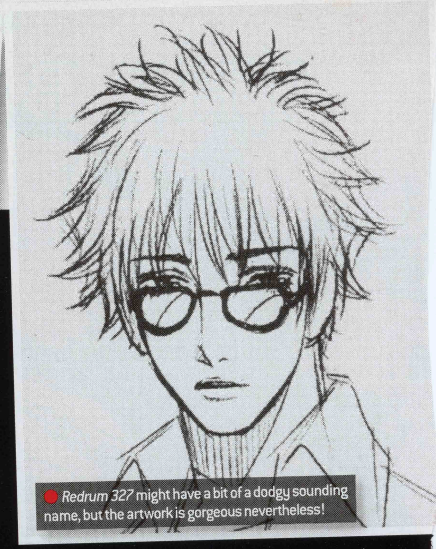
NEO NEWS NETWORK



A beautiful stranger finds her way into the group at the centre of the story.


Redrum 327 might have a bit of a dodgy sounding name, but the artwork is gorgeous nevertheless!

Scream flashbacks

Redrum 327

A GROUP OF rich kids get together in a secluded countryside mansion to hang out, relax and tell creepy ghost stories. They bring with them a beautiful and quiet young newcomer, and everything seems set for them to have a peaceful weekend. Yeah – we all know better than that, right?

With a plot premise that harks back to Hollywood slasher films of the '90s, there's plenty to assume about this manga series before even picking it up. And when you do open it and find the comic relief, the quiet nerd and the unassuming beauty all in the first few pages, you might be forgiven for expecting something you've seen before in thriller books and movies countless times over. But taking a closer look at the beautiful artwork by Ya-seong Ko, there's plenty here that makes it worthy for a read. Ko's art style really is amazing, and we're promised some interesting plot twists as past histories are revealed, and strange things start to happen. It all seems a bit *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, but it's nice to see something mature and spooky in manga form which doesn't rely on fantastical horror to get your heart going. The first volume is out in July from TOKYOPOP.

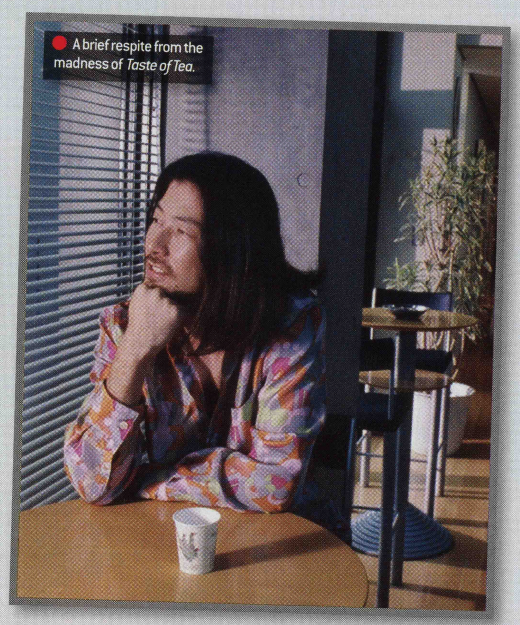
The Taste of Tea

A strange brew from Japan

YOU'RE PROBABLY SEEN Katsuhito Ishii's work, even if you don't know it. He helped Quentin Tarantino with that now internationally famous animated sequence in *Kill Bill Volume 1*, but his latest film, *The Taste of Tea*, is cut from a very different cloth.

It's a surreal comedy about the Harano family, who live in a small village in the mountains north of Tokyo. Mum Yoshiko wants to restart her former career as an animator, so she's trying to finish drawing a cartoon by hand, working at the kitchen table, while her hypnotherapist husband practices on anyone and everyone close at hand. Daughter Sachiko is plagued by a giant doppelganger who won't leave her alone, while her teenage brother is a mass of raging hormones. Grandpa is determined to start a pop band, while uncle Ayano is visiting from the city, hoping to unwind and relax in the countryside.

The Taste of Tea has won awards at film festivals in Brussels, Montreal, San Francisco and New York, collecting glowing reviews along the way. Picked up for US distribution by Viz Pictures, *The Taste of Tea* is touring American cities until May and with any luck it should find its way to our side of the pond. Until then, feast your eyes on our stills for a freaky preview of that doppelganger we promised.


A brief respite from the madness of *Taste of Tea*.

How long before people start cosplaying *Cosplay Complex* at the MCM Expos?

Cosplay Complex

Carry On Cosplaying

THE COSPLAY ASSOCIATION of East Oizuji Academy is in trouble. They've only got two members, no sponsorship and it seems no chance of winning a local cosplay competition, never mind making it to the World Championships. The arrival of new student Chako, who just happens to live with Delmo, a magical bunnygirl who can make any costume imaginable and even alter the girls' physiques to fit them, revives the flagging Cosplay Association and sets the members on the path to glory, or least some nice new outfits.

Based on a true story (possibly) *Cosplay Complex* is a three-part OVA coming to DVD on 7 May from ADV Films. The other members of the club are Maria, a quiet girl with glasses, and her sister Athena, who is too young to attend East Oizuji Academy but is still part of the Cosplay Association. Then there's Italian exchange student Jenny, who for reasons known only to herself, falls madly in love with Athena the moment she sets eyes on her. The three 30-minute episodes are bursting with bawdy humour and countless references to other anime, including an homage to *Gunbuster* in episode one. Expect slapstick, outrageous outfits and extra helpings of fanservice.

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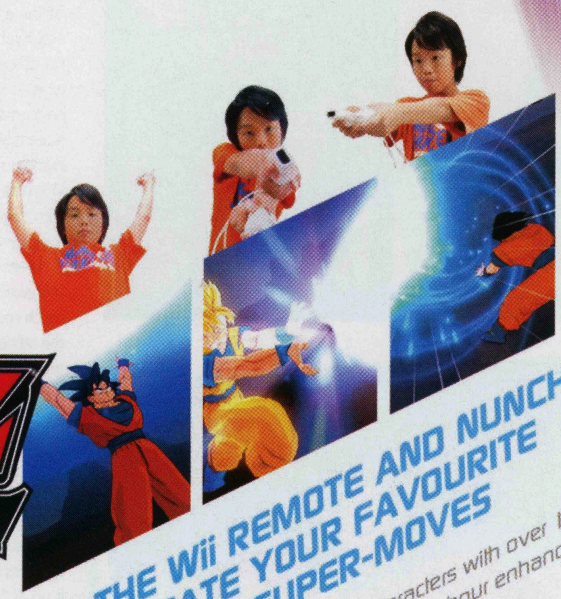

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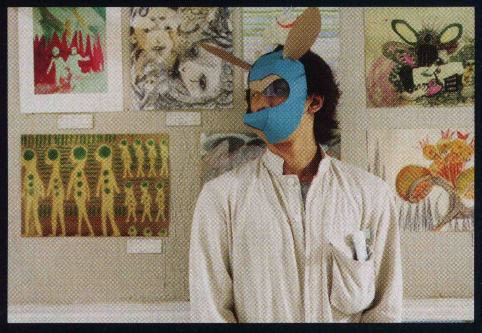
NEO NEWS NETWORK

CRAZY IN LOVE

Park Chan-wook swaps vengeance for romance

AFTER HIS GRUESOME vengeance trilogy, director Park Chan-wook's new film is a change of pace. *I'm A Cyborg, But That's Okay* is a wacky comedy about love and lunacy. Yeong-gun (Lim Su-jeong) is admitted to a mental hospital because she is convinced that she's a cyborg. Aside from talking to vending machines, Yeong-gun has stopped eating, preferring to recharge herself by licking batteries. She's wasting away, much to the consternation of inmate Il-sun (South Korean pop star Rain), a kleptomaniac. Il-sun enters Yoeng-gun's fantasy world to help her deal with her delusions and learn to be human once more.

I'm a Cyborg… has a much lighter tone than Park's last three films, but his visual flair and twisted imagination are very much to the fore in Yeong-gun's wild flights of fancy. Distribution rights have already been sold for Japan and France, and hopefully the movie will follow *Lady Vengeance* to the UK.



Negima Drama

LIVE ACTION SERIES CALLED OFF?

IN A FAST MOVING chain of events, news of a live action *Negima* drama was released, and then the following day retracted, as actress Ai Tanimoto first published in her online blog that she would be starring in the series, then sneakily deleted the entry on the following day.

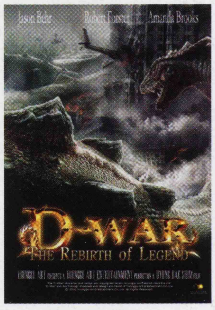
The news was reported on the fantastic website www.animenewsservice.com, where speculation was rife as to the meaning of the post and subsequent deletion. Whilst it seems unlikely that Ai Tanimoto would audition for a part in a series which didn't exist, the second animated series of *Negima* has had such bad ratings in Japan that it could be possible the series has been cancelled before it even began filming. However, Ken Akamatsu, author of the original manga, has promised news of a brand new project to be unveiled in April.

Either way, it seems unlikely that the series would make its way to western shores, particularly seeing as live action versions of cult series like *Sailor Moon* have failed to gain an English language release, despite their kooky charm.

EASTERN ENTERTAINMENT EYE

Dragon Slain

GRAEME NICHOLSON ON A REAL MONSTER OF A MOVIE



The alarmingly steep drop-off in demand for Korean movies overseas I talked about last month – in a nutshell, export is down more than two-thirds – will not be stemmed by the country's most expensive film of all time.

If you follow Asian cinema, you've probably run into *D-War* before. It's been around forever, plagued by failure and embarrassment. The project, now eight years in the making, has been the personal burden of slapstick funnyman Hyung-Rae Shim, who as a kind of pudgy buffoon was greatly successful in South Korea in the 80s and 90s, starring in dozens of silly fantasy films including nine in the *Young-gu* series (such as *Young-gu* and *Count Dracula*).

In tribute to the character that made him the best paid Korean actor of the 90s, Shim founded his very own production company in '93, called Younggu-Art. After producing a few more comedies, he set about making his first monster movie, *Yonggary*, with dreams of sci-fi's universal appeal making the piece a blockbuster not just at home, but worldwide, bolstered by English language dialogue and western actors.

Overhyped and under-delivered doesn't really cut it; *Yonggary* was disastrously disappointing when it appeared in 1999, replete with starchy performances and crude CG work. No one could quite believe what Shim had turned in. Industrial investors accused him of embezzling their money. Shim released an updated version 18 months later, with new reshoots and re-rendered graphics, but nobody went to see it. Total price: £7.7 million.

From the ashes of *Yonggary*, Shim emerged unshaken, doubly determined in fact to spend much more money, time and hyperbole attempting the same again: English script, western actors, heavy reliance on CG. *Dragon Wars*, about a giant supernatural serpent in Los Angeles seeking transformation into a dragon, was advertised with a 2002 release date. Filming didn't even start until two years after that. Oh dear.

Now, two years after filming ended, the final cut, rebadged *D-War*, has been run at the Berlin Film Festival, and the results are not good (although the graphics are better). Derek Elley of Variety summed it up as "a feast of A-grade FX married to a Z-grade, irony-free script." The price tag this time? £36 million. Goodbye, Hyung-Rae Shim!

NEO MOST WANTED ANIME

Gunslinger Girls

In May, Revelation Films are releasing a boxset of the very excellent Gunslinger Girls series – another chance to pick up this fantastically complex show.

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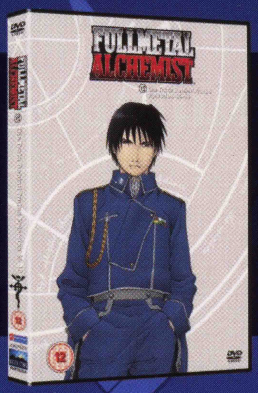

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NEO NEWS NETWORK

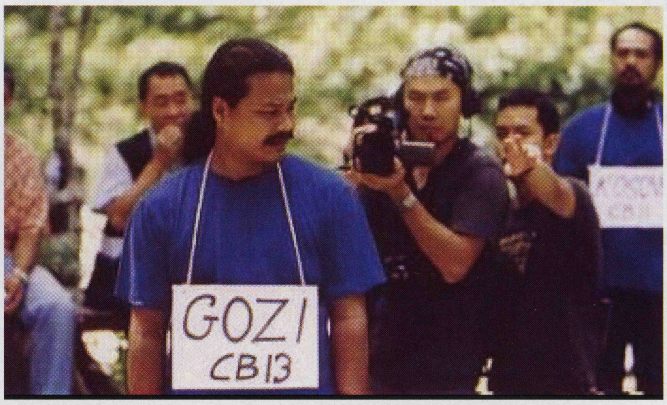
MANGA PULSE

Soundalikes

Jonathan Clements on a love gone awry

THIS ISSUE'S MANGA SNAPSHOT charts the irresistible rise of Harlequin® manga, although the brand has had a torrid history in the English language. It all began with the announcement in 2005 of what first appeared to be a fairy tale romance – the wealthy heiress of Harlequin Enterprises, plighting its troth in the manga business to the handsome cad Dark Horse Comics. But there was no happy-ever-after for this new couple. It was only a matter of months before stiff press releases announced their separation. I suspect that the constant hype of the manga business, ever suggesting that Japanese comics are taking the world by storm, caused Harlequin to assume that manga versions of their books might sell as well as… er… the books themselves. Dark Horse put a brave face on it, cleverly noting that it had done a lot for promoting Harlequin in the comics world, although Harlequin's audience comprises young girls unlikely to go anywhere near a comics store. In fact, Harlequin's readership is so large because it is out of the usual loop – the company's output is often unfairly disparaged as "grocery store publishing", by critics who fail to notice that there are lot more groceries in existence than bookstores, and a lot more "casual readers" than bookworms.

Harlequin has taken the manga imprint back in-house, rebranding it and producing it themselves – a harsh reminder that much as manga may brag and fuss over its fashionable status, it is still a mere wallflower in the high-stakes world of mass publishing. Harlequin's first English-language releases under its Pink Ginger Blossom Mangas (sic) label include *Jinxed*, *Misunderstood* and *A Prince Needs a Princess*. There have been a lot of new arrivals in the manga scene, and many of them have failed. But whether a multi-million dollar operation needs comics know-how to sell manga to a new crowd remains to be seen.



Asia on demand

Firecracker explodes into TV

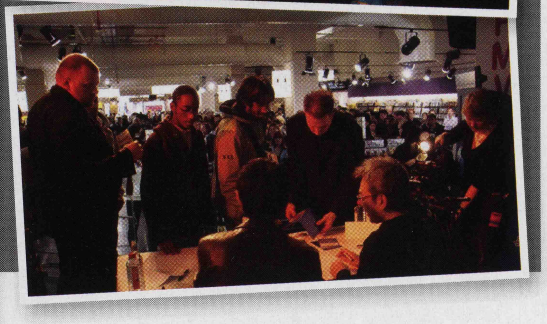
NOT CONTENT WITH holding an annual movie showcase, publishing a magazine and maintaining their excellent website, Firecracker Media has announced the launch of their online television channel devoted exclusively to Asian cinema. FirecrackerTV offers members both a linear stream of content comprising trailers, short films and interviews, alongside feature films on demand.

The brainchild of Erika Franklin and Nick North, the new service will showcase films from all over Asia and their starting line-up includes Woo Ming Jin's docudrama *Monday Morning Glory* (above), in which a group of terrorists are forced to re-enact their plot to blow up a nightclub in Malaysia. There's teen soccer romance *Gol and Gincu* (left), Malaysia's answer to *Bend It Like Beckham*, while there are two entire seasons devoted to the films of Filipino exploitation master Bobby Suarez, featuring the likes of *Dynamite Johnson*, *One-Armed Executioner*, *Bionic Boy* and *Cleopatra Wong*. Check out www.firecrackertv.com for details.

Final Fantasy Cosplay

FANS ATTENDING THE *Final Fantasy XII* launch event in HMV in London were treated to a rare opportunity to meet the creators of the game. Akitoshi Kawazu and Hiroshi Minagawa were both in attendance at the launch on 23 February and answered a few questions and signed a heck of a lot of games and goodies.

The cosplaying event was a huge success, as hundreds of fans turned up in full *Final Fantasy* regalia. Prizes were on offer for the best, and NEO has a few snaps of some of the choice outfits. We were glad to see that the launch generated huge queues of *FF* fans, all eager to snap up the new instalment of the franchise, which we believe really is one of the best games in the series. Reviewed in issue 031 of NEO, the game picked up our first ever Editor's Choice award.



NEO MOST WANTED MOVIE

The City Of Violence

May brings the latest from Ryoo Seung-wan (Arahan, Crying Fist), who directs and co-stars with Jeong Du-hong in *The City of Violence*, a thriller heavy on two-fisted martial

Win!

Samurai Warriors

Ten copies of Samurai Warriors 2 on Xbox 360 and PS2 to giveaway

SAMURAI WARRIORS 2 Empires is the latest edition in the multi-million pound *Warriors* series. If you want to see what our new NEO reviewer, Clarissa Day, made of the game, check out our review on page 079.

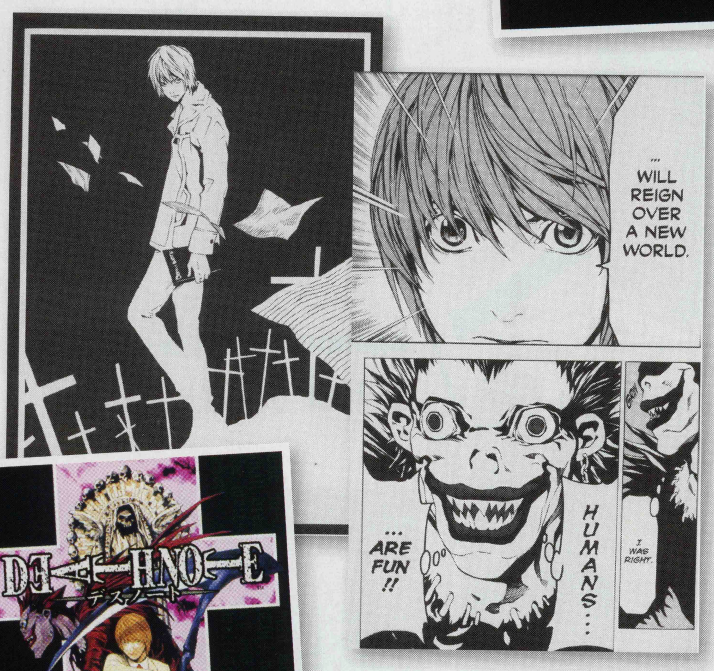
The game is set in feudal Japan, and players must unite the country's 25 warring regions using a blend of tactical skills and brute force. We have five copies of the game for the PlayStation 2, and five copies of the game for the Xbox 360, and you can get your hands on one by answering the following question correctly:

What period is the game set in?

A) Ancient Japan
B) Fifth period
C) 21st century

To enter, check out the boxout. Please specify on your postcard which version of the game you would like.

SAMURAI WARRIORS 2 戦国無双 Empires



Death Note

Win one of 20 copies of Death Note

THE LOVELY GUYS at Travelling Man are raving about their favourite graphic novel at the moment: *Death Note*. Here at NEO, we love the series too, and rated it one of our top 25 essential manga titles. In order to share Travelling Man's excitement at the manga, we have 20 copies of volume one to give away to NEO readers.

To be in for a chance of winning one of these volumes, simply answer the following question correctly.

What is the name of the demon who has lost his Death Note in the graphic novel?

A) Light
B) Ryuk
C) Shibuimaru

To enter, check our competition boxout, and for more information about the Travelling Man stores visit www.myspace.com/travellingmanshops.

Travelling Man WE LOVE COMICS

How to Enter

If you want to enter either of our competitions, all you have to is write your name and address on the back of a postcard, along with your answer, to the Uncooked Media editorial address printed on page 005. For the Samurai Warriors competition, please address your postcard to: NEO 031 Samurai Warriors Competition. For the Travelling Man competition, please address your postcard to: NEO 031 Travelling Man competition. Please see our competitions page on 098 for more terms and conditions. Closing date for both competitions is 01 May '07.

TOKYO STREET GUIDE 004

Akihabara

EVERY MONTH DANIEL ROBSON BRINGS YOU NEO'S OFFICIAL GUIDE TO THE STREETS OF TOKYO. THIS MONTH, OTAKU WONDERLAND AKIHABARA

Akihabara is an otaku's dream; a one-stop hotspot loaded with anime, manga, videogames, electronics and, erm, pornography. Yes, Akiba offers all this and more to the neon-minded Japanophile with a fat wallet and loose morals. Start at Akihabara station's Electric Town exit, where maid cosplayers hand out flyers and pose for pictures, and don't forget your passport – many electronics shops offer duty-free purchases on export models.

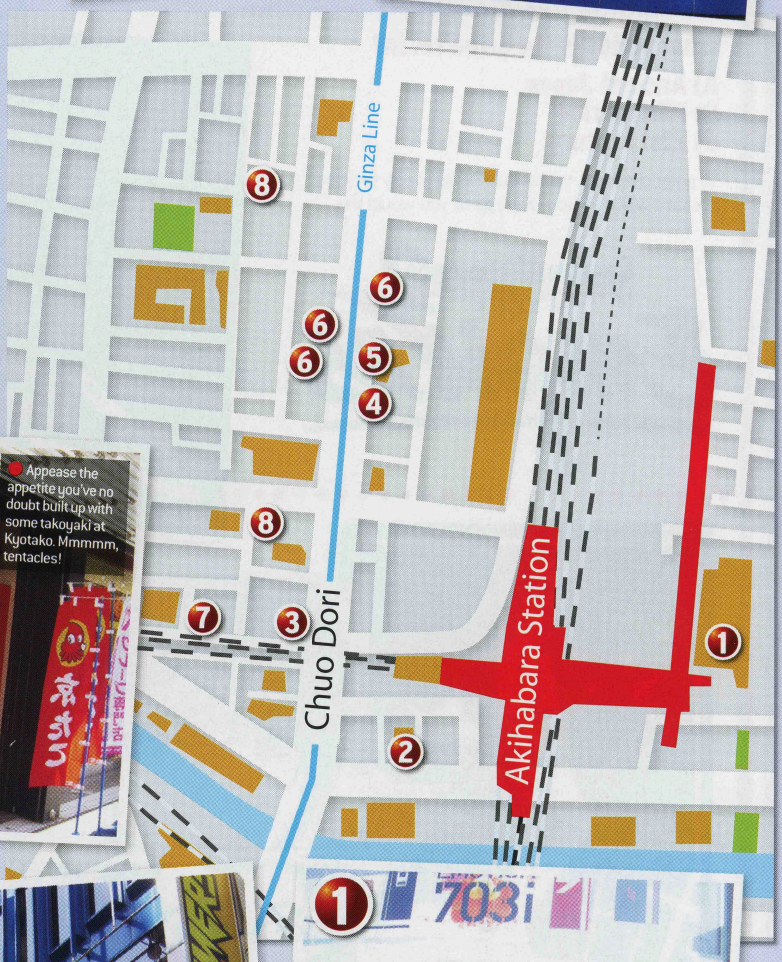
Game Hollywood carries ancient consoles, games and accessories. But where's Game Bollywood?

Maid cafés are a cosplayer's heaven, if a bit weird. @home Café is super-popular, so expect to queue.

Sofmap's various branches carry new and used games and peripherals for every console.

Appease the appetite you've no doubt built up with some takoyaki at Kyotako. Mmmmm, tentacles!

Comic Toranoana specialises in dodgy, dirty hentai manga, anime and games. You have been warned...



Club Sega is Akiba's spikiest, bluest, fastest arcade – although there are millions in the neighbourhood.

Anime, manga, soundtrack CDs, collectibles and of course videogames – Gamers has it all.

Roughly the size of Sheffield, Yodobashi Camera sells every electronic device you can imagine.

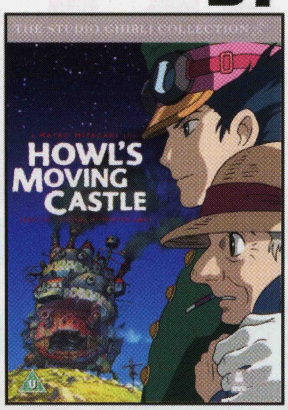
BE INSPIRED

ANIME DVDs FROM £7

£7

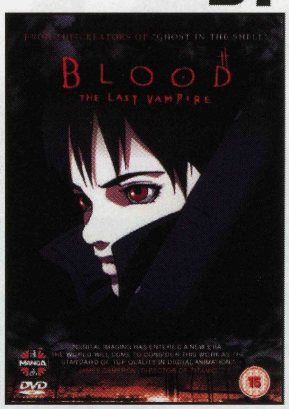
GHOST IN A SHELL 2 INNOCENCE - 2DVD

£7



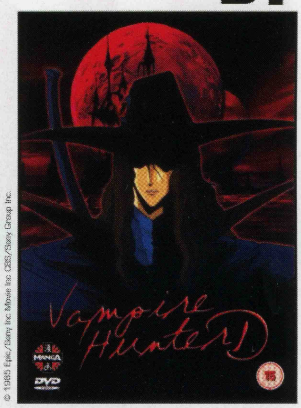
HOWL'S MOVING CASTLE

£7



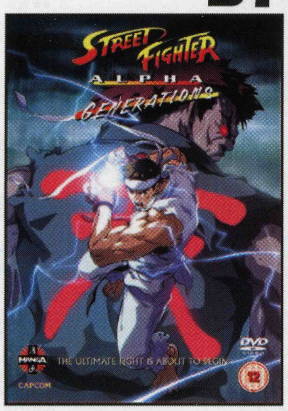
BLOOD THE LAST VAMPIRE

£7



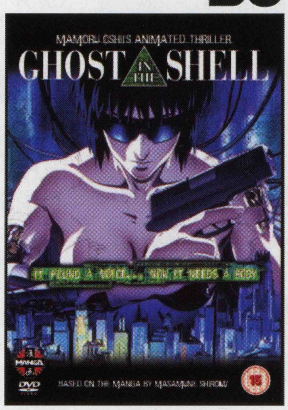
VAMPIRE HUNTER D

£7



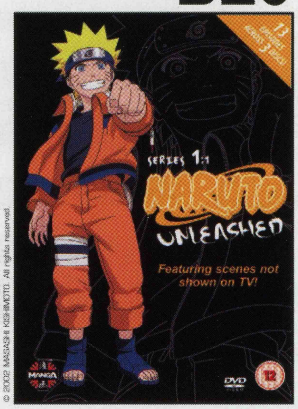
STREET FIGHTER ALPHA GENERATIONS

£8



GHOST IN A SHELL

£10



NARUTO UNLEASHED SERIES 1

£10

APPLESEED 2DVD

Offer applies to DVDs bearing this sticker. Titles are available for a limited period only.
Individual titles which appear elsewhere in the store, outside of this campaign, may be priced differently. Prices may vary online.

IN-STORE, ONLINE, DOWNLOAD
OVER 230 HMV STORES NATIONWIDE
FREE UK DELIVERY ONLINE AT HMV.CO.UK
OVER 2M TRACKS AT HMVDIGITAL.COM

HMV
HMV.CO.UK

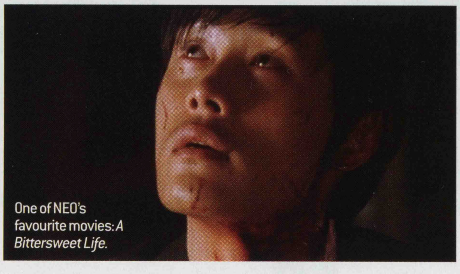
WIN! A PS3 console and game Page 098!

INCOMING...

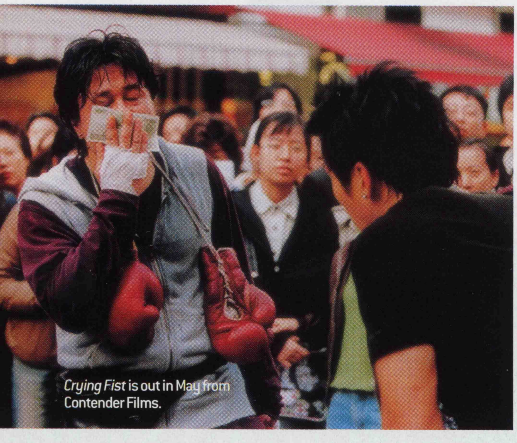
UK release schedule

Asian Film

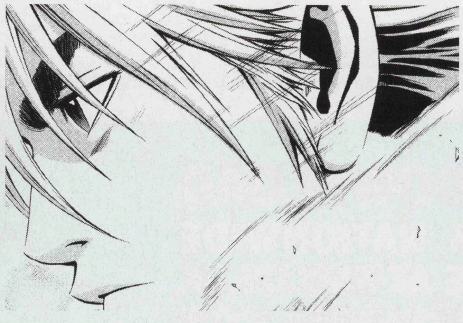
DATE	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
09/04	Sword in the Moon	Tartan
13/04	Curse of the Golden Flower	Universal
16/04	Sex and Zen	Hong Kong Legends
23/04	ID	Terra
23/04	Manji	Yume Pictures
23/04	Omen (Sung Hom)	TBC
23/04	Séance	Tartan
23/04	Shogun's Samurai	TBC
23/04	Spider Forest	Tartan Asia Extreme
27/04	Typhoon (theatrical)	Contender
30/04	Black Kiss	Terra
07/05	Seven Swords (1 Disc)	Contender
14/05	Snake and Crane Arts of Shaolin	Hong Kong Legends
14/05	The Wig	Tartan Asia Extreme
14/05	Shiver	Tartan Asia Extreme
18/05	City of Violence	Contender
21/05	New Fist of Fury	Hong Kong Legends
21/05	No Blood No Tears	Third Window
21/05	Guns and Talks	Third Window
21/05	Say Yes	Third Window
28/05	Crying Fist: Regular Edition	Contender
28/05	Dead or Alive Trilogy	Tartan
28/05	Graveyard of Honour	Tartan
28/05	Irezumi	Yume Pictures
28/05	The Bow	Tartan
01/06	Takashi Miike's One Missed Call	Contender
04/06	Election: Volume 2	Optimum
04/06	Green Fish	Third Window
04/06	Wild Card	Third Window
11/06	Dragon Fist	Hong Kong Legends
11/06	Blood and Bones	Tartan
18/06	Spiritual Kung Fu	Hong Kong Legends
25/06	A Bittersweet Life (Special Edition)	Tartan
25/06	Shinobi	Optimum
25/06	Red Shoes	Tartan Asia Extreme
02/07	Initial D	Contender
23/07	The Dual Project	Tartan
23/07	Duelist	Contender
03/09	Typhoon (DVD)	Contender
01/10	Warrior King (1 Disc)	Contender
TBC	Female Yakuza Tale	Fabulous Films
TBC	Sex and Fury	Fabulous Films



One of NEO's favourite movies: *A Bittersweet Life.*



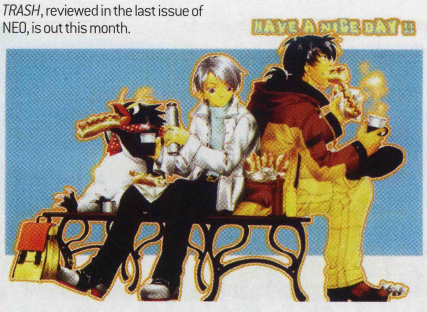
Crying Fist is out in May from Contender Films.



Anime

DATE	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
02/04	Speed Grapher 1	MVM
02/04	Ah! My Goddess 2	MVM
02/04	Samurai 7 v7	MVM
02/04	Tenjho Tenge 6	MVM
02/04	Tenchi Movie box	MVM
02/04	Manga Essentials 2	Manga
02/04	Robotech: The New Generation box	Manga
12/04	Inuyasha	Fabulous Films
16/04	Coyote Ragtime Show 1	ADV
16/04	Hellsing	ADV
16/04	Jinki: Extend 2	ADV
16/04	Samurai Gun 4	ADV
16/04	Yugo The Negotiator 4	ADV
23/04	Fullmetal Alchemist 12	Revelation
23/04	Spiral 4	Revelation
23/04	Negima 2	Revelation
30/04	Fantastic Children 6	Beez
07/05	Elemental Gelade 1	MVM
07/05	Elemental Gelade 1 with book	MVM
07/05	Saiyuki Reload 3	MVM
07/05	GunxSword 2	MVM
07/05	Love Hina box	MVM
14/05	Tokko 2	Manga
21/05	Cosplay Complex	ADV
21/05	Gilgamesh 7	ADV
21/05	Le Chevalier D'Eon 1	ADV

TRASH, reviewed in the last issue of NEO, is out this month.



Anime cont...

DATE	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
21/05	Samurai X Collection	ADV
21/05	This Ugly Yet Beautiful World 2	ADV
21/05	Fullmetal Alchemist 13	Revelation
21/05	Spiral 5	Revelation
21/05	Rumbling Hearts 2	Revelation
21/05	Gunslinger Girls box	Revelation
18/06	Coyote Ragtime Show 2	ADV
18/06	Guyver 1	ADV

Manga

DATE	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
29/03	Puri Puri 1	DrMaster
29/03	Lunar Legend Tsukihime 4	DrMaster
29/03	Junk 2	DrMaster
29/03	Stray Little Devil 4	DrMaster
29/03	Chinese Hero 1	DrMaster
01/04	ArchLord 1	TOKYOPOP
01/04	Magic x Miracle 1	TOKYOPOP
01/04	Trash 1	TOKYOPOP
01/04	My Dead Girlfriend 1	TOKYOPOP
01/04	Otogi Zoshi 1	TOKYOPOP
01/04	Sokora Refugees 2	TOKYOPOP
01/04	Tsukuyomi: Moon Phase 2	TOKYOPOP
01/04	Girls Bravo 3	TOKYOPOP
01/04	Ark Angels 3	TOKYOPOP
01/04	Off*Beat 3	TOKYOPOP
01/04	Tramps Like Us 4	TOKYOPOP
01/04	Rebirth 5	TOKYOPOP
01/04	Chronicles of the Cursed Sword 5	TOKYOPOP
01/04	Sgt. Frog 6	TOKYOPOP
01/04	Psychic Academy 6	TOKYOPOP
01/04	PhD Phantasy Degree 6	TOKYOPOP
01/04	Faeries Landing 7	TOKYOPOP
01/04	Tokyo Tribes 7	TOKYOPOP
01/04	RG Veda 8	TOKYOPOP
01/04	Pet Shop of Horrors 9	TOKYOPOP
01/04	Get Backers 12	TOKYOPOP
01/04	Initial D 18	TOKYOPOP
04/04	Gunsmith Cats Burst 1	Dark Horse
04/04	Old Boy 5	Dark Horse
04/04	Cipher 7	CMX
04/04	VS.	CMX
11/04	Oh! My Goddess 26	Dark Horse
11/04	Oh! My Goddess 5	Dark Horse
11/04	Vampire Hunter D 7	Dark Horse
11/04	Densha Otoko 3	CMX

UK Charts

What's been filling your basket lately?

ASIAN FILM

amazon.co.uk

FEB	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
01	Grave of the Fireflies	Optimum
02	Ran	Optimum
03	Seven Samurai	BFI
04	Kagemusha	20th Century Fox
05	The Twilight Samurai	Tartan
06	Naruse box 1	Eureka
07	Ozu Noriko Trilogy	Tartan
08	Battle Royale 2	Tartan
09	When the Last Sword is Drawn	Tartan
10	Zatoichi	Artificial Eye

CHART ANALYSIS: Surprisingly, the anime movie *Grave of the Fireflies* outsells all other titles this month to make it to the top of Amazon's chart.

ANIME

sendit.com

FEB	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
01	GITS:SAC 2nd Gig Complete	Manga
02	Fullmetal Alchemist 11	Revelation
03	Fullmetal Alchemist 10	Revelation
04	This Ugly Yet Beautiful World 1	ADV
05	Neon Genesis Evangelion Platinum: Collection	ADV
06	Jinki: Extend 1	ADV
07	Samurai 7 v6	MVM
08	Mobile Suit Gundam Seed 6	Beez
09	Street Fighter 2	Manga
10	Steamboy	Sony

CHART ANALYSIS: *Ghost in the Shell* finds its way to the top of the charts, up from second place last month, and *Evangelion* falls from first down to fifth.

MANGA

amazon.co.uk

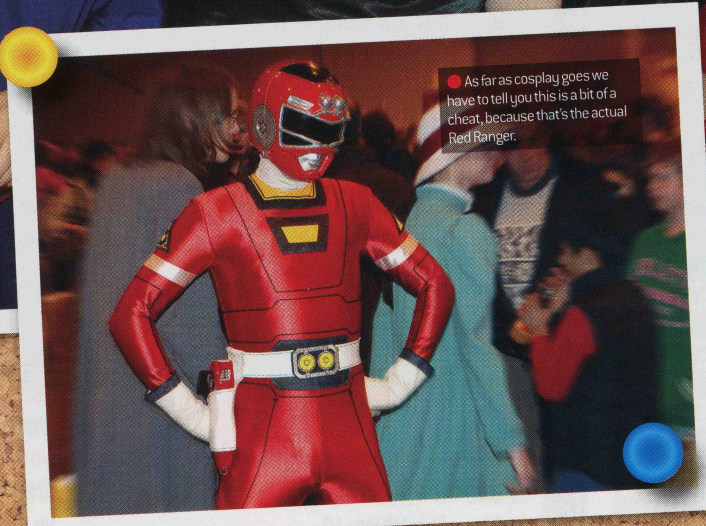
FEB	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
01	Death Note 10	Viz
02	Death Note 1	Viz
03	Death Note 3	Viz
04	Death Note 2	Viz
05	Death Note 4	Viz
06	Naruto 13	Viz
07	Death Note 5	Viz
08	Death Note 9	Viz
09	Fruits Basket 15	TOKYOPOP
10	Death Note 6	Viz

CHART ANALYSIS: Not shown here, but at numbers 11 and 12 in the charts were *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*, by Sonia Leong and Emma Vieceli.

NEO READERS STRUT THEIR STUFF!

COSPLAY CORNER

A plethora of lovely ladies cosplaying in February's Midlands Expo – ten points if you can name all the characters. We've definitely spotted Kiki in there...



As far as cosplay goes we have to tell you this is a bit of a cheat, because that's the actual Red Ranger.

If you recognise where the inspiration for this cool and quirky costume came from, give yourself a NEO gold star. And a nice cup of tea, of course!

COSPLAY COLUMN "I'm ready for my close-up..."

A Cosplayers Guide to Good Photography

What better way to celebrate your amazing costume than by taking the perfect photo to display to the entire world? (Not to mention submitting it here to NEO magazine to show it off!)

Here are a few basic pointers that can really improve a cosplay photograph, and you won't need a fancy camera or studio to do it. It just takes a little know how and patience.

Lighting: Hotels, Expo centres and such do not always have the best lighting possible. Hotels are often too "warm" (orange) and centres too "cold" (blue), so it's important to keep that in mind. If you can try and take photos outside, this also helps with another aspect of cosplay photography that I'll cover in a second.

Sunlight, or even an overcast sky, provides a natural light source and will cause less colouration. Most digital cameras also come with various environment settings, which can be found on a turn wheel, or in the menu. Your manual should detail each of these and how they can help.

Backdrop: Let's face it, having your character posing against a background of gormless event attendees is hardly fitting. Try experimenting outside against trees, buildings and other structures. This provides an interesting backdrop but won't detract from the costume too much. Arrange a time to do a photo shoot and scout out some potential areas!

Framing: The typical front-facing, do a pose, static images can get boring. Try experimenting with "framing" the cosplayer within the background, get them to pose dramatically and try different angles of a "shot". Another sneaky tactic is to pretend you're not really shooting and catch them when they are just messing around.

More is better: If you can schedule a time for a real photo shoot and get a friend with a good camera memory, you can spend time getting lots and lots of photos. The more photos you take, the higher the chance that one of them will turn out just the way you want. Equally, the less you take, the higher chance the camera will catch you sneezing, blinking, or showing your bad side. When I do a shoot for friends, I try to take 200 plus pictures, and then I let them pick the best ones.

That's it from me, just want to say a quick congratulations to all the winners from the Midlands Expo Masquerade. Keep sewing!

Mark Hulmes

It's Nintendo double teaming as Ash, Misty and the Mario Brothers stalk the Midlands Expo floor, looking for innocent creatures to capture or stamp on.

What would an Expo be without some Final Fantasy cosplayers?

NEO's pic of the very talented Karen Dawson, dressed as Amaterasu from *Okami*. Karen was the first place winner of the Midlands Expo Masquerade.

Were you part of this *Hellsing* group? If so, claim your prize!

If you are interested in submitting your photo to NEO, please email mail@neomag.co.uk with 'COSPLAY CORNER' as your subject header, along with an internet link with your photo. You must be able to email us this image as an attachment if required.

ADV FILMS AND NEO WANT TO KNOW IS THIS YOU?

NEO and ADV Films have joined forces to present a monthly celebration of cosplay – with prizes! Every month, we will feature a photo of cosplayers taken at the ADV booth at a recent event. The only proviso is that the costume needs to be from a series released here in the UK by ADV Films.

This month, this image was taken at the MCM Expo in Telford – if the person in the photo is you, you can win cool ADV stuff! See the boxout for competition rules and how to claim.

Rules

Here's how to claim your prize:

1) Get a photo of yourself in your costume.

2) Get a photo of yourself out of costume.

3) Attach both photos as picture files to an email, or send two emails if they're large. Files can be no larger than 5MB.

4) Send with your name, contact email, phone number and postal address to competitions@advfilms.co.uk and mail@neomag.co.uk, quoting 'NEO 31'.

Additional rules

Entries must be in by 1 May. NEO cannot enter into correspondence regarding this competition.

CHOP STICKS NEO'S COOKERY SCHOOL

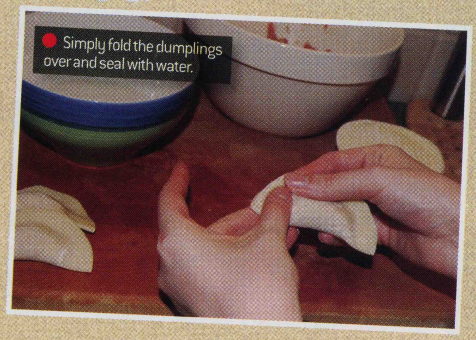
015: Wonton soup

Wontons are delicious dumplings packed with meat, veggies and seasonings – although they are more like ravioli as they consist of a pasta-type outer casing with a filling inside. Wontons are typically served boiled in a soup or are deep-fried – we've gone for the soup option here.

Ingredients for wonton soup

Serves four to six
2 litres chicken stock
4 tbs rice wine
3 tbs light soy sauce
1-2 red chillies
2 spring onions
1/2 ts minced ginger
Wonton wrappers
200g minced pork or chicken
2 cloves minced garlic
1 ts minced ginger
1 tbs oyster sauce

Finely julienne the chilli and spring onion to create a garnish with a pleasing contrast in colours.


Simply fold the dumplings over and seal with water.

Method

Prepare your vegetables first. Peel the ginger and then chop it finely, along with the garlic. You won't want to bite down on a big chunk of either of these, so do your best to get the pieces as small as possible. Your spring onions and chillies will be floating decoratively in the soup bowl, so shred them into evenly sized matchsticks. Make sure the pieces aren't too thick, as the chilli will be hot. If you don't like spicy food it's best to leave the chilli out all together.

In a bowl, mix the minced meat, garlic, ginger and oyster sauce together. Use your hands for this so that you mix in the seasoning well.

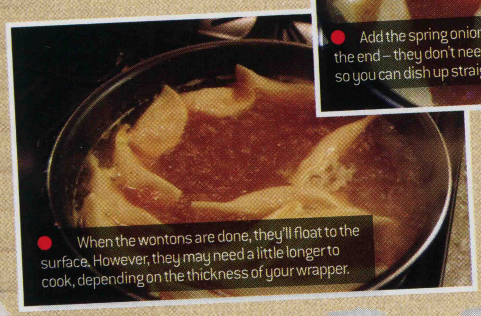
To make the wontons, place a small teaspoon of meat mixture in the centre of the wrapper, and wet the edges with some water. Then fold in half and pinch the edges together firmly. Stop when you run out of meat mixture, or when you have enough wontons for at least five per person.

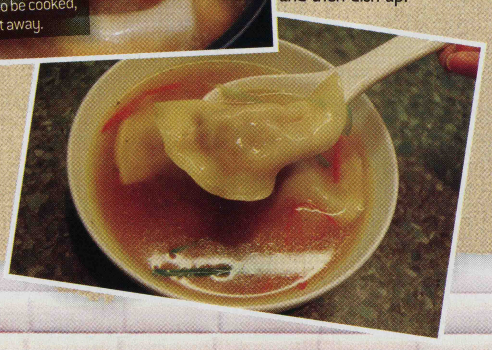
Once you have your wontons, cover them over with a damp cloth to prevent them from drying up. Then put the chicken stock on to boil. Make this with chicken stock cubes, but ensure the end result isn't too salty as you'll be adding soy sauce later.

When the stock is bubbling nicely, add most of the rice wine and soy sauce, then taste to see if you need to add extra. If you can't find rice wine, try using dry sherry instead.

Add the dumplings to the stock and simmer for around five minutes. You can tell they're done when they float to the surface, but if you're concerned then fish one out to check the centre. Now add the spring onion and chillies and then dish up!

Add the spring onion and chillies at the end – they don't need to be cooked, so you can dish up straight away.


When the wontons are done, they'll float to the surface. However, they may need a little longer to cook, depending on the thickness of your wrapper.



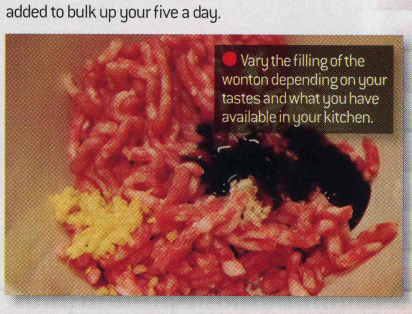
Wonton Skins

Wontons are typically made from a square shaped dumpling wrapper – we've cheated here and used the ones we had to hand, which were round. We folded ours in half to make a simple half moon shape, but there are many elaborate ways to fold your wontons. Take a look online as many sites offer step-by-step tutorials.

Fillings

You can also vary the filling of your wonton to include different minced meat (try chicken), minced spring onions, dried and reconstituted Chinese mushrooms, chopped prawns or finely chopped vegetables such as Chinese leaf, water chestnuts, carrots, bamboo shoots or white cabbage. See what you have in your cupboard and improvise!

You can also add extras to the soup itself – green vegetables like pak choy or choy sum can be shredded and added to bulk up your five a day.


Vary the filling of the wonton depending on your tastes and what you have available in your kitchen.

NEW SERIES FROM TOKYOPOP IN APRIL!

THE MANGA REVOLUTION · LEADING · LEAP · 漫画革命

A classic tale of a hero who must grow up and harness the power of a magical sword in order to bring balance to his land—and fulfill his destiny as Archlord!

BASED ON THE HIT MMORPG!

It's an identity crisis when a girl's got to fill the shoes of the world's most powerful wizard

IT'S A TALE OF MAGIC, MYSTERY, AND MISTAKEN IDENTITY!

The door to Kingdom Hearts was sealed, trapping Riku and King Mickey—now Sora, Donald, and Goofy's search for their friends leads them to the mysterious Castle Oblivion!

BASED ON THE BEST-SELLING VIDEO GAME FRANCHISE

When your uncle is the biggest mafia boss in the city, it's hard to stay out of the family business!

FROM THE CREATOR OF *FAKE*

Boy meets ghost girl, boy loses ghost girl, boy tries to turn into ghost to get girl back!

"A DELIGHT!"—JOSS WHEDON, CREATOR OF *BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER*

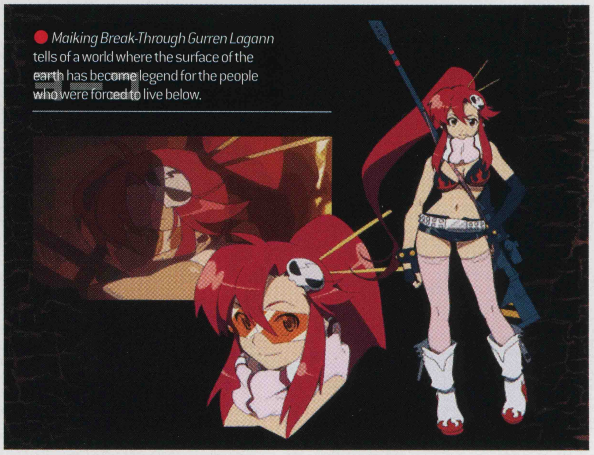
www.TOKYOPOP.co.uk

Archlord: © NHN Games Corporation, © Park Jin-Hwan / DAIWON C.I. Inc. / Magical X Miracle: © Yuzu Mizutani / Trash: © SANAMI MATOH. / My Dead Girlfriend: © Eric Wight and TOKYOPOP Inc. / Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories: © 2002,2007 Disney. Characters from Final Fantasy © 1990,1997,1999,2002 Square Enix Co., Ltd.

ANIMARKET

What's Hot in the Land of the Rising Sun

Gainax, at it again with another mecha release in the form of *Maiking Break-Through Gurren Lagann*.

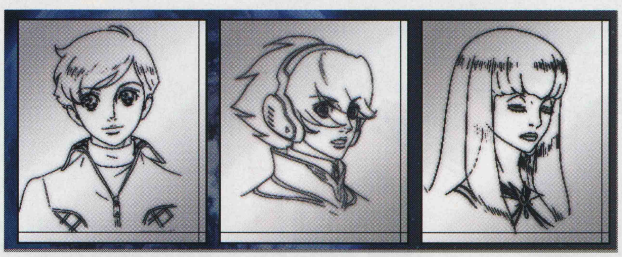


Maiking Break-Through Gurren Lagann tells of a world where the surface of the earth has become legend for the people who were forced to live below.

Here at NEO, we go right to the source for our anime fix and we're giving you the low-down on the hottest anime series on Japanese TV right now

By the time you read this, it should be April and that means spring is officially here – especially in Japan, where seasons are a serious business. April is not just the start of a new financial year for the Japanese, it also heralds the start of the school year, picnics under cherry trees and a fresh influx of anime series. So, in a change to the usual service, we're going to look at a roundup of some of the new series that will be starting this month.

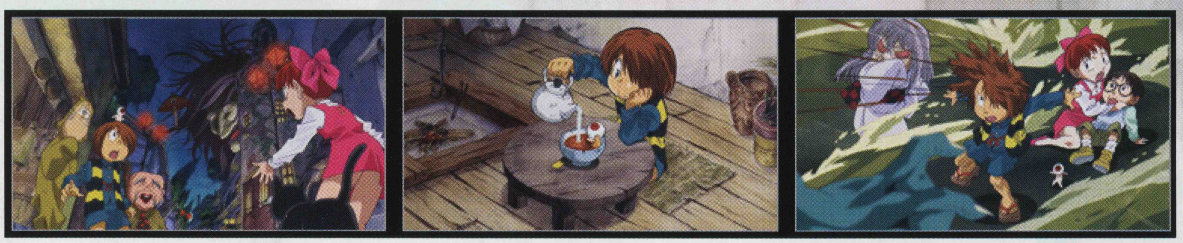
Toward the Terra is based on the sci-fi manga by Keiko Takemiya, which was first animated back in the 1970s. There was a movie produced in 1980 and this new anime series is being directed by Osamu Yamazaki, with character designs by Nobuteru Yuuki of *The Vision of Escaflowne*. Set in the far future, the Earth has been drained and is now a polluted shell. Humanity has fled into space and now lives in colonies managed by computers. Psychics known as the Mu are feared by humans and aren't happy with life in deep space. They yearn to return to Earth. Soldier Blue, leader of the Mu, finds a successor in a boy called Jomy and together they begin the search for home, where their people can live without the dread of being hunted.



Game to TV

Of all the games released in Japan for the Xbox 360, only *Lost Planet* and *Idolm@ster*

> “April is not just the start of a new financial year for the Japanese, it also heralds a fresh influx of anime series.”



seem to have made an impact on the general gameplaying population. The latter saw the player taking the role of a music producer and overseeing the careers of a collection of up and coming idols. Now *Idolm@aster* is getting its own anime series – with a twist.

Produced by Sunrise, *Idolmaster Xenoglossia* turns the ten prospective idols into 15-year-old students who also happen to be leading double lives as *iDolmasters*. An iDol is actually a mecha which is capable of saving the planet. Each iDolmaster can only control their own Prometheus class iDol, which include different models like Imber, Nebula and Nebilum. They are powerful enough to shatter the meteorites which always seem to be on a collision course with Earth.

And what would April be without a mecha offering from Gainax? *Maiking Break-Through Gurren Lagann* is set in a future where humans have been living in subterranean villages for so long that the surface has become a thing of legend. Simon spends his life patiently digging away in an attempt to expand the village when he comes across a strange piece of technology called the Core Drill. The key to this technology lies with Kamina, leader of the Gurren Gang, who are determined to see the surface. But when the ceiling of their village cracks open, the gang soon come across a giant mecha destroying their home and meet a girl from the surfaced named Yoko. Simon soon discovers the Core Drill activates the mecha and he somehow knows how to pilot it…

Kitaro, remade for yet another generation.

Ge Ge Ge no Kitaro was originally a classic manga tale.

Idolm@aster was one of the few Xbox 360 games to have made an impact in Japan.

The anime series *Idolmaster Xenoglossia* captitalises on the cute singing idols that made the original game such a hit.

IF IT WORKS – REMAKE IT

As we've already seen from shows like *Toward the Terra*, older anime series will often get remakes ten or even 20 years after they first aired. One such show is the classic *Ge Ge Ge no Kitaro* which originally aired in 1968 and is getting a new anime series and a movie adaptation, both of which air in April. This latest series will be the fourth time *Ge Ge Ge no Kitaro* will have been animated by Toei, and it focuses on Kitaro, the last member of the Ghost Tribe. Most of the characters are based on real Japanese legends and ghosts, and it remains a popular series.

MANGA SNAPSHOT HARLEQUIN®

NEO doesn't wait for translation. Jonathan Clements looks at what's happening in the Japanese comics world right now...

Issue#: 100 (ish)
Debut Year: 1999?
Page Count: c.540
Publisher: Ohzora / Harlequin KK
Price: 630 yen (£2.63)
Cycle: Monthly

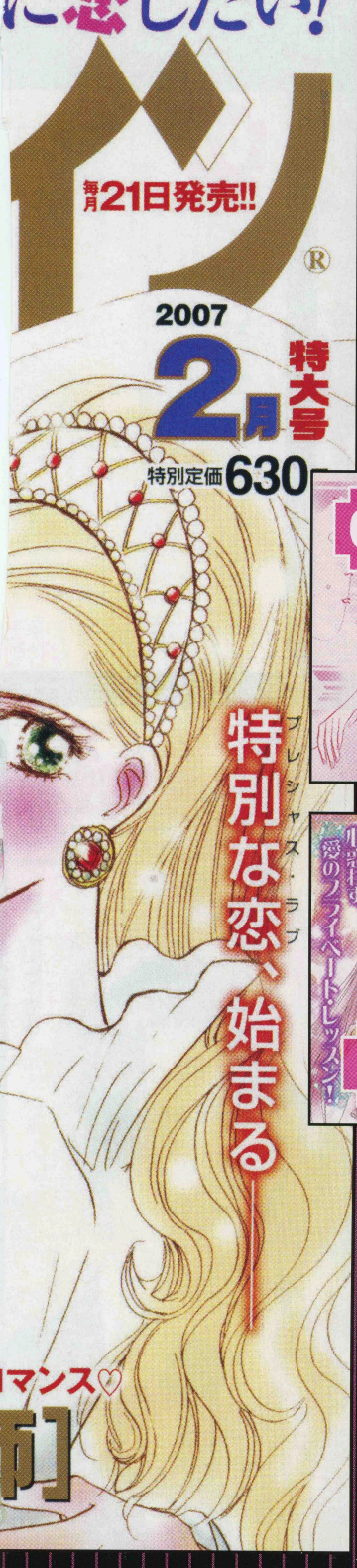
Although the name may not be immediately familiar to English readers, Harlequin Enterprises is the current owner of a label still often thought to be quintessentially British. The company was founded in Canada in 1949, and specialised in women's publishing from its earliest inception. Ten years later, it began licensing titles from the famous Mills & Boon romance brand, and found many more lonely hearts and incurable romantics in North America than in Mills & Boon's British home. By 1971, Harlequin had done so well that it was able to buy its former supplier. While the Mills & Boon name is still a popular brand in the UK, its romance products are better known around the world under the Harlequin monicker, in 27 different languages, including Japanese.

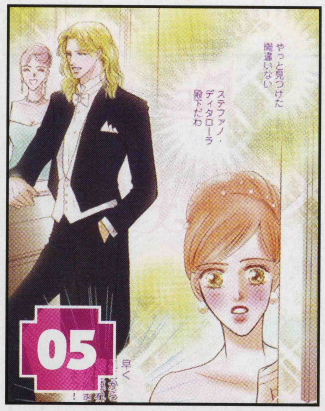
TISSUES AND ISSUES

Harlequin Japan (1) was set up in 1988 to translate romantic fiction into Asian markets. Faced with unprecedented competition from well-established romance anthologies like Hana to Yume (Flowers and Dreams) and Margaret (2), the Tokyo office soon fought back with its own manga magazine, translating English-language novels into Japanese, and, crucially, using Japanese artists.

That makes the output of Harlequin a bona fide part of the manga world. As with Mills & Boon and Harlequin novels in our own world, opening one of its publications is an entry into a puzzling subculture of hearts and flowers, of trembling lips and dewy eyes, as handsome princes are tamed by the will and sacrifice of their elegant ladies, who might start off as girls next door, but scrub up nicely to become princesses in waiting.

On the subject of which, the adverts and incidental articles in Harlequin magazine provide similar roller-coaster passions. Here, the reader finds an ad for bust enhancement, since apparently one's handsome prince will simply not come until one's boobs are bumped up from a C to an E (3). The competition prizes this issue are a grab bag of classy cosmetics, including a Prada make-up pouch, Givenchy pong, and a Coach scarf. A diet supplement pill with the unfortunate name of Fat End occupies two pages of advertorial, complete with charts, a message from a Scientist in a White Coat, and before/after pictures of Ugly Sisters who have become Cinderellas. Meanwhile, the horoscopes offer a bewildering array of consumer advice to get the reader through the month. Eye shadow is, it seems, the only way that Geminis will get lucky over the next 30 days, while Cancers are exhorted to festoon themselves in designer





ALL AMERICA WEPT!

"Zenbei ga naita!"

Japanese romances and tragedies are often rated for modern audiences by the number of tissues required to sob one's way through. A single-tissue production might feature a single unfortunate accident and half-hearted reunion. A two-tissue affair could involve a major accident, star-crossed lovers and possibly a small pet pulling through. Triple-tissue warnings only apply to major surgery, doomed love, and tragic ponies.

However, advertisers saw their gimmick backfire in recent years with the use of the term "All America Wept." Originally intended to refer to a movie that had held US audiences enraptured, the term became so overused by eager marketers that it is now something of a joke. If a Japanese person says "All America Wept" in the cynical 21st century, it is liable to be translated as a dismissal of unnecessary emotion – tantamount to "Nothing Special."

goods, and Taureans are advised to get themselves a mirror ball. One almost wishes that more Japanese girls took such advice seriously, as it would surely brighten up a shopping trip to Shinjuku, if one girl in every 12 was dragging around a disco lighting array, while every Sagittarius was on the lookout for "a masked angel." But then again, that does pretty much describe Shinjuku anyway. On the back cover, Kleenex clean up with an advert for tissues.

MY FAIR LADY

As for the stories themselves, Harlequin has significantly less than the average manga anthology. This is because it eschews the usual serialisation element of most Japanese comics. Its tales begin and end in a single issue in page-counts of more than a hundred each, which is great for the occasional reader, but limits the number of titles that can fit.

The Prince's Tutor (4) by Nicole Burnham was published in English in 2003, and is the most recently published story to feature in this issue. Its plucky yet unsure heroine is Amanda Hutton, a governess hired by the obscure European monarch Eduardo diTalora to teach his wayward son Stephano the ways of protocol. Amanda is initially reluctant, since she is used to schooling children, not spoilt youths. Prince Stephano is an unabashed cad, devoted to skiing, yachting and other jet-set pursuits, and determined to give his unwelcome tutor the run-around. One doesn't need to be a rocket scientist to see where this is going, particularly when the cover of Harlequin magazine loudly proclaims: "All stories self-contained, and with happy-endism."

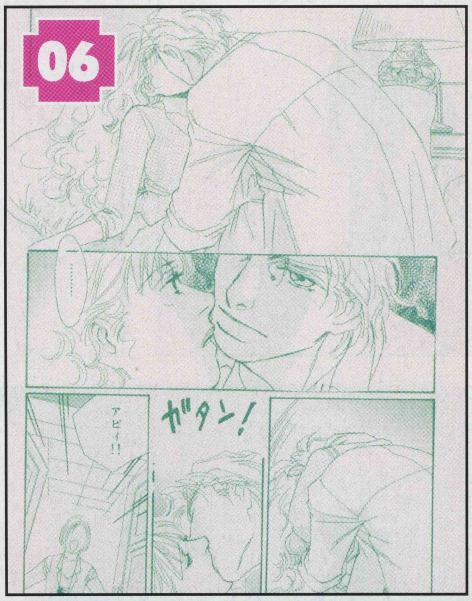
But Japanese readers are less interested in the original than they are in the artist of the manga version. As the unusually strong backstory of *The Prince's Tutor* implies, it is part of a larger series – Amanda's best friend Jennifer has already got her own handsome prince, by marrying Stephano's elder brother in the earlier *Going to the Castle*. But such details need not trouble Japanese readers, who are expected to be far more interested in the home team: it's artist Soraha Himura, not Burnham, who gets top billing on the cover. Himura's work has graced many other Harlequin translations, with bodice-ripping titles like *Turbulent Covenant*, *The Playboy Sheikh* and *The Wife Next Door*. But who is this masked stranger? The artist's name is quite clearly a pseudonym – the mysterious Ms Kimura could well be another, much better known manga creator, drawing such adaptations for pocket money.

READER, SHE MARRIED HIM

Notably, the uncredited translators and adaptors of the stories make only small concessions to the local readership – part of Harlequin's appeal in the Japanese market rests on its foreign exoticism. Stephano was tall, dark and handsome on the original American cover of *The Prince's Tutor*, suddenly, in the manga version he has long blond hair (5).

While the stories themselves are translated faithfully, the titles are often altered for extra emphasis. Emma Richmond's 1999 romance *The Reluctant Groom* is transformed in Harlequin manga form into *The Winds of Gibraltar* (6). Abby Hunter, 28-year-old virgin, is a gawky,

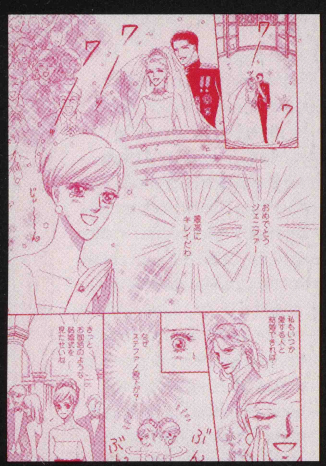
Opening one of Harlequin's publications is an entry into a puzzling subculture of hearts and flowers, of trembling lips and dewy eyes, as handsome princes are tamed by the will and sacrifice of their elegant ladies.



A MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN?

A Fine Romance

Romance manga have been obsessed with royal romances throughout the modern era, in part because life was there ahead of art. In the 1950s, when girls' manga were still finding their feet, 23-year-old Japanese everygirl Michiko Shoda met a handsome young man on a tennis court – a man who turned out to be the dashing Prince Akihito. Actually, it's not all that rags-to-riches – Michiko's dad was president of the massive Nisshin Flour Milling company, and Akihito's love match was only approved after prolonged negotiations between government representatives. But to the Japanese people, that fateful tennis match was a sign of fairy tale romance – supposedly the first time that a Japanese prince had married a commoner. The former Miss Shoda is now Empress Michiko of Japan.

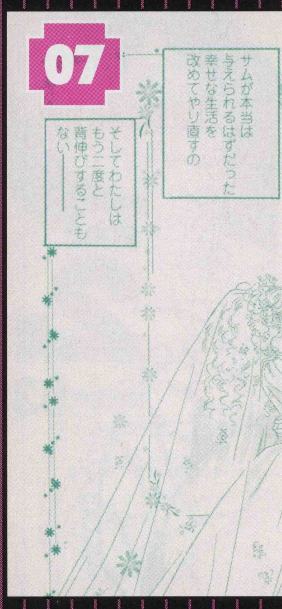


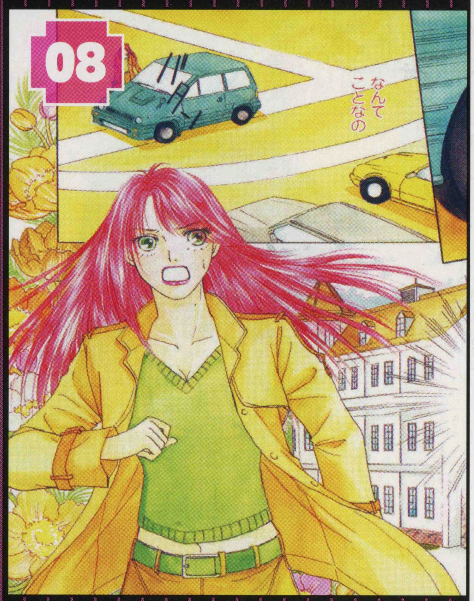
hapless girl who feels extra awkward around men. Imagine, then, her surprise when handsome, blond tycoon Sam Turner propositions her. A heartless cynic who doesn't believe in love or marriage, the impossibly handsome Sam is clearly in need of some education, and Abby is the one who provides it, clinging to her heartfelt moral position, rebuffing his daring advances, and going weak at the knees at the merest prospect of a snog. It's a foregone conclusion that Richmond's story will end with its heroine marching up the aisle (7) – what suspense there is lies in how she gets her man. Will this be an old-fashioned Mills & Boon, or one of the more modern ones with a bit of sex thrown in? Artist Kakuko Shinozaki supposedly uses her real name, although she only shows up on Japanese databases drawing other Harlequin stories – she sprang fully-formed into the manga world, drawing racier romances such as *Mission to Seduce* and *Mackenzie's Pleasure*, in similar light, airy styles, low on shading and backgrounds, with all the artist's energy concentrated on the faces and emotions of the passionate characters. She also works under other pseudonyms, as "Yoshino Shinozaki" and "Neneko Pochiko", but it's Harlequin that seems to put food on the table in the Shinozaki house, with the other names appearing only infrequently.

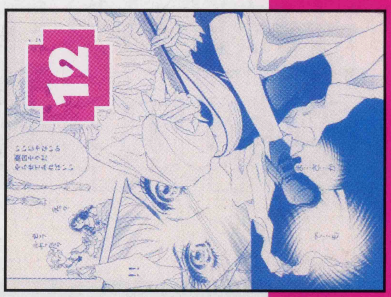
POPPY LOVE

The Harlequin line is itself divided into several mini-brands, including the Red Dress imprint that apes Bridget Jones's neurotic self-regard, and fantasy novels under the Luna imprint. But by far its longest running sub-genre has to be medical fiction, with less emphasis on bone-saws and bodily fluids, and more on pert starry-eyed nurses and the handsome doctors they adore. Tales such as Helen Shelton's 1997 *Poppy's Passion*, remade in Harlequin manga-form as *Don't Call It First Love* (8).

Artist Atsumi Ryo has never worked for Harlequin before, but has previously drawn manga adaptations of murder novels, most notably Mitsuhiko Asami's mystery *A Letter From Hoichi the Earless*. But there's no murder here,







as pink-haired intern Poppy breezes into work late, only to discover that the newest recruit at her hospital is the tall, dark and handsome Tom Grainger, a man she adored from afar six years ago. Before he went off to study surgery at Oxford (Where else? Mills & Boon heroes never graduate from Scunthorpe Poly), Tom was also the subject of Poppy's most embarrassing teenage incident, when he literally crushed her hopes. It was Tom who came back one night from a night on the town with Some Blonde Floozy, diving onto his bed with The Wavy-Haired Slut Who Isn't Good Enough For Him, only to almost squash poor young wallflower Poppy, who had been lurking beneath the sheets, hoping to surprise him (9).

"Of course I love you, Poppy," he had said later on, "But I love you like a brother." Oh, the agony! And that was before Tom's indiscretion with the Evil Blond Tart turns out to be with the wife of a fellow doctor, leading to his dismissal from Saint Joan's Hospital, and his disappearance from Poppy's life.

Which brings us to the here and now, with Poppy realising that she still has feelings for Tom, and that she is no longer the daft naked teenager hiding in his bed, even if she is still open-mouthed in awe at his rich doctor's life, with open-topped car rides around exotic, foreign London town (10), bottles of New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc (that's right, no expense spared!), and a passionate confession in the lounge.

"I'm not a cold, heartless surgeon," confesses Tom. "When I am with you, I am just a man…"

And with such a statement, it's only a matter of time before Poppy is all dressed in white for her wedding at a country church, where artist Ryo attempts to depict her glowing with love for her man, although the unfortunate omission of pupils from her eyes in the final frame make it look as if she has been brainwashed and sent off to married life as a Stepford zombie (11).

THE DARK HALF

Harlequin romances are also unable to resist the allure of the past, hence the brand of Harlequin Historicals, set in times without adequate plumbing or broadband internet access, when men were apparently men and women were bafflingly grateful. All, that is, except for Chiara di Paradini, a half-gipsy fortune-teller in 18th century Venice, who is determined to seek revenge on Luca Zeani, the wealthy aristocrat who ruined her sister's reputation. Except that when Chiara uses her psychic powers to look into Luca's soul, she sees nothing but good in him. Has she misunderstood the handsome, rich Mr Zeani after all? Surely it could not be that the blond, beautiful and did we mention, rich Mr Zeani has an evil twin, who looks just like him, but has all the morals of a bounder and a cad? Such frustrations form the central plot of *The Shadowed Heart*, a 1998 historical by "Nina Beaumont" (a pen-name for Nina Gettler), highly regarded by romance readers, and given the manga treatment here under the new title of *A Venetian Fantasy* (12). But artist Karin Miyamoto has also drawn many more modern Harlequin stories, including *The Sudden Bride*, *The Edge of Paradise*, *Playboy Doctor* and *Bodyguard Lover*.

And that's your lot – just four self-contained stories with the promised "happy-endism". And as a one final note, this is printed with noticeably better quality paper than most other anthologies, with production values we haven't seen since Kiss, another girls' mag. ■

One doesn't need to be a rocket scientist to see where this is going, particularly when the cover of Harlequin magazine loudly proclaims: "All stories self-contained, and with happy-endism."

HalCali: the queens of pop-hop

FIVE FEET HIGH AND RISING

WORLD EXCLUSIVE! COOLER THAN ICE CUBE, MORE VALUABLE THAN 50 CENT AND TASTIER THAN EMINEM, HALCALI ARE FINALLY IN THE HOUSE, AS DANIEL ROBSON COLLARS THEM FOR THEIR FIRST EVER ENGLISH-LANGUAGE INTERVIEW

It's a curious thing. Back in June 2003, BBC3 played host to a new sensation in pop music. Appearing on the excellent *Adam & Joe Go Tokyo!* series (repeated later on BBC1), two girls treated a studio audience to a fusion of hip hop and pop – 'pop-hop', if you will – and the western world became just that little bit brighter. And then... nothing. HalCali, Japan's coolest b-girl duo, went on to release albums, singles and DVDs in Japan, but we Brits got not a sniff of it.

That is, until now.

Speaking to NEO in their record label's Tokyo office, Halca and Yucali are engaging in their first overseas activity in the four years since Adam & Joe, and their first ever English-language interview. They are dressed immaculately. They bubble over with excitement, speaking even faster than they usually rap, punctuating their banter with giggles and funny gestures. Ladies and gentlemen of Britain, we are proud to give you: HalCali.

"That BBC show was only six months after we made our debut in Japan," recalls Yucali, 19. "We'd never even been on TV before in Japan, and this was the BBC!"

"We got on really well with Adam and Joe," says Halca, 18, who graduates from high school this month.

"Speaking through a translator made us kind of nervous and at first we couldn't really communicate

BEATS ON THE BOX

HALCALI HAVE SOUNDTRACKED SEVERAL ANIME – BUT WHAT'S THEIR FAVOURITE?

Halca: "Many western people like Japanese anime, but I'm Japanese and I prefer western cartoons. It's flipped backwards. My favourite's *The Powerpuff Girls*."

Yucali: "There's a Japanese version of The *Powerpuff Girls* now, and our single 'Look' is the ending theme."

Halca: "The characters in the American version are a really cute shape. I was so surprised that on the Japanese version they gave the girls such nice figures."

Yucali: "I think Japanese people have a complex that western people have a nicer figure. So in the Japanese version they made the girls more shapely, maybe because we all wish we could be like that, ha ha."

"It's not typical hip hop – it's toy music" –YUCALI

HalCali: the 'b' in b-girl stands for brilliant.

well," continues Yucali. (Neither girl speaks English, and we're using another translator today.) "But just by messing around and going 'Yay! Yay! Yay!' Adam and Joe made us feel more comfortable. That was really fun. They're nice people."

HalCali Bacon

The song the pair performed was 'Girigiri Surfrider', their third single in Japan, and a revelatory slice of feel-good rap with a chorus catchier than a cold. The debut album that followed that September, HalCali Bacon, was produced by OTF, a production unit comprising members of J-hoppers Rip Slyme. As with a lot of Japanese rap music, Rip Slyme's style is laid-back and fun, echoing leftfield hip hop pioneers De La Soul rather than the violent misogyny of, say, 50 Cent. Having discovered Halca and Yucali at a talent contest, OTF gifted the girls with a poppier version of Rip Slyme's style, and in turn HalCali (pronounced Ha-ru-ka-ri) offered natural lyrical flow and bizarre humour.

All of this was instantly evident on HalCali Bacon, a ludicrously addictive album that blended old-skool beats with youthful charm. And surprisingly, it was also extremely innovative, framing the girls' fast and fantastic rapping with a genre-mangling party vibe that never patronised the listener. As such, it proved cute enough for teens and cool enough for grown-ups.

"When we recorded that album we were junior high-school students, so we didn't really have any set idea of what genre we wanted to make," says Yucali. "We wanted to just have fun recording, and it turned out that it really appealed to adults." ›

Knockout! Promotion for 'Look' leaves the teen MCs floored.

"We still love that album," says Halca.

"It was like, after school we'd go to the studio and have some fun," grins Yucali. "It was a social thing, it didn't really feel like work. Whenever we weren't working we'd be playing games or whatever, so we didn't really take in everything that was happening."

"Looking back, we didn't really stick to one genre, hip hop or whatever, and that was probably a good thing," considers Halca. "That's why the album turned out to be better than we'd expected."

In keeping with the smart musical approach, the album and singles all bore stylish artwork and super-cool videos. 'Girigiri Surfrider' took a tongue-in-cheek approach to gang warfare, as rival Tokyo gangs parodied Michael Jackson's 'Beat It' dance routine; and before that, debut single 'Tandem' offered a video bursting with colour and rich with detail.

"We put in a lot of time and effort on the video for 'Tandem', says Yucali. "We actually changed our clothes 26 times! But after doing such a great first video, we thought we should keep it up in future, and that's why our videos are always so cool. We really enjoy it; it's the best part of the job for us."

"We love watching the finished videos," says Halca. "We'll watch them several times at home."

"I love me!" yelps Yucali in English.

"I love me!" echoes Halca.

In fact, the video's director, Tanaka Hideyuki, went on to make the recent Softbank mobile phone ads in Japan that feature Cameron Diaz. "Sorry Cameron! We were before you," quips Yucali.

"That's all there is to it!" laughs Halca.

Do feel like dancing

Key to the appeal of the videos and HalCali's live shows are the superb dance routines, which the girls choreograph themselves. Their talent as dancers almost rivals their talent as MCs, which, frankly, is utterly unfair.

"It's really hard work!" exclaims Yucali. "If they were typical hip hop tracks, the beat would be simple, so it would easier to think about how to dance. But because in HalCali's music the BPM changes all the time, faster and slower, it's not typical hip hop. It's toy music."

"We always think carefully about how to dance to each song," says Halca. "It might take a day sometimes, but it's fun."

"Before we make the actual routine, we start out just having a chat about it," reveals Yucali. "We want our choreography to be like a story based on the lyrics. So for example, in the lyrics to the song 'Baby Blue' from our second album, we use the word Friday. There's a magazine in Japan called Friday, so the dance has us making a shape with our hands as though we're reading a magazine. Nobody else would notice that, but that's what we like to do."

The girls after one too many episodes of The Catherine Tate Show.

ALBUM RELEASES

Title: HalCali Bacon
Released: Sept. 2003
Label: For Life
Best tracks: 'Tandem', 'Girigiri Surfrider', 'Otsukare Summer'

Title: Ongaku No Susume
Released: Nov. 2004
Label: For Life
Best tracks: 'Marching March', 'Baby Blue', 'Continued'

Title: TBA
Released: Summer 2007
Label: Epic
Best tracks: We're sure they'll all be best...

RECENT SINGLES

Title: 'Twinkle Star'
Released: Feb. 2006
Label: Epic

Title: 'Look'
Released: Dec. 2006
Label: Epic

Title: 'Tougenkyo'
Released: March 2007
Label: Epic

The sleeve for the girls' 'Twinkle Star' single.

The videos from HalCali Bacon were bundled onto the superb HalCali DVD (Kari), along with loads of envelope-pushing remix videos, hilarious outtakes and the cute video to Christmas single 'Strawberry Chips', the first taste of album number two.

Ongaku No Susume, or Recommended Music, offered a new side to HalCali. Released in 2004, the album felt more adult, and even more musically diverse. It was less cohesive, causing some fans to crave the homogenous simplicity of the debut album, and the girls sang rather than rapping on many tracks. But Ongaku No Susume was nonetheless another high-class pop-hop record, stuffed with floor-fillers and slowies alike, from the high-NRG of 'Marching March' and 'Baby Blue' to the pensive Spanish-guitar-fuelled 'Hare Tokidoki' and the jangly country stylings of 'Densetsu No Futari', penned by J-pop star Yuki and her hubby Yo-King.

HalCali have worked with the absolute cream of electronic Japanese music on their albums, singles, B-sides and the remix album HalCalimi, including Fantastic Plastic Machine, m-flo, Cubismo Grafico, Nomiya Maki from Pizzicato 5, Takkyu Ishino, Yuka Honda, Supercar and more. Yucali suggests that the freedom of their music is what attracts these high-profile, influential collaborators, but Halca has a simpler suggestion: "Maybe they can smell something on us..."

In person, the girls are just as easygoing as you'd expect. They're also terribly humble, denouncing their own opinions as "too big" for such young artists.

"We're not that famous," insists Yucali. "Honest! I'm not just being humble. People don't scream at us in the street or anything like that."

"Maybe they will in the UK!" enthuses Halca. "It would be so cool to be more famous in the UK than Japan. That's our new goal!"

No strategy

In 2005 HalCali changed labels from For Life Music Entertainment to Sony imprint Epic, and over the course of about a year released just three full singles: 'Tip Taps Tip', 'Twinkle Star' and 'Look'. The first and third of these were used as anime themes – for *Eureka 7* and *Demashita! Powerpuff Girls Z* respectively – and saw Halca and Yucali singing and rapping over sentimental Europop, while 'Twinkle Star' blared out grandiose fanfares and kinetic rhythms that were impossible to not dance to. Incidentally, the video for 'Look,' with the two girls trapped in a Rubik's Cube, is impossibly ace.

Each of these three singles had a different flavour, and each performed very differently in the charts. HalCali admit that they find it frustrating that some of their singles have failed to trouble the upper echelons of the charts, but they say they relish their genre-hopping approach and the freedom it affords them.

"It's basically random," says Halca, referring to their unpredictable style. "We want to be HalCali, that's the main thing. That will never change. But we want to make music that nobody else can."

"The music we make is something only we can do," agrees Yucali, "and as long as that doesn't change, it doesn't matter if the style changes. There's no strategy. We just think about what we want to do next and then do it."

The duo released three download-only singles at the turn of 2007, each one celebrating the respective season: Christmas single 'Slalom 06' in December, New-Year song '2 Higher Clap 007' in January and the utterly amazing 'Girl!

Girl!' around Valentine's. And as if to further prove their point about releasing whatever the hell they like, they've turned their entire sound on its head with this month's full-release single 'Tougenkyo,' which features a live band bashing out new-wave grooves as the girls spin a mysterious yarn about Utopia.

"We really enjoyed recording with a band," says Yucali. "It was so cool! I took photos of the drums and guitars. The beat was great with live drums. It sounds cool rapping over rock music."

"I don't know if people can hear how much we enjoyed ourselves when they listen to that CD, but I hope so," says Halca. "We love working with other people to make fantastic songs; not just the two of us but other artistic people."

Produced by Honesty, the production duo behind some of Kaela Kimura's music, the song is as far from 'Girigiri Surfrider's' pop-hop template as you're ever likely to get. And yet it works, nestling into the diverse HalCali tapestry with ease.

"It's quite a sad song," says Yucali. "We didn't write the words, but it's about trying to convince yourself that you're happy on your own, when actually you're waiting for your boyfriend's phone call. But we didn't want to be too serious, so we wrote a rap part to make it funnier. We didn't know the word 'tougenkyo' at first, so we had it explained to us. It's like something that doesn't exist: heaven, or paradise. So in the rap part, we wanted to talk about something that doesn't exist; a myth."

HalPuff?

The track also recalls the last couple of albums by Puffy AmiYumi, who've mutated from a cute pop duo to a ballsy punk-pop affair as they take on America. People often refer to HalCali as 'the hip hop Puffy', and 'Tougenkyo' is sure to encourage this comparison even more.

"It can't be helped. We're a female duo, and we have so many things in common with Puffy," says Halca. "But we want to be HalCali. If some other band was told they were their genre's HalCali, they probably wouldn't like it either. But if people want to call us that, then so be it."

Goodness only knows what to expect from the third HalCali album. Judging by their recent output it's likely to be even more mixed up than ever before, but beyond a tentative early-summer release date for Japan's rainy season, the girls are giving nothing away.

"We haven't started on it yet," teases Yucali. "We have some ideas but we'll keep it a secret! We like to keep secrets," she giggles.

"We don't even have a title yet," says Halca. "The titles always come up when we're chatting, so we have to be careful. If we say something now, it can't be the title of the next album!"

"For our first album, HalCali Bacon, Fumiya from OTF had been overseas and told us about a breakfast he'd had with crispy bacon," says Yucali. "The Japanese for 'crispy' is 'karikari', so we call it karikari bacon. So when he said 'karikari bacon', it just clicked – karikari bacon became HalCali Bacon."

One thing's for sure: HalCali's next album will be a lot of fun. No matter which genres they toy with, the pop-hop heart will surely beat strong. And now that they know the whole world is listening, who knows where the future will take them?

www.halcali.com ■

● Skip to the present: Halca (left) and Yucali shedding some energy in February this year.

"It would be so cool to be more famous in the UK than Japan. That's our new goal!" – HALCA

THE LAST WORD

HALCALI'S FINAL MESSAGE FOR NEO READERS

Yucali: "You know, maybe over the rest of the article, the readers didn't quite get us. So this is our last chance to get our message across. It's got to be right! It's critical! If this was for a Japanese magazine or TV show and we said something we didn't really mean, we could always correct it later. But if we say something now, it's set in stone."

Halca: "We want to visit the UK! I love British fashion – people there are so trendy. I like UK rock-style fashion. Not any celebrity in particular, just the general style, very slim, with big hair, very slim trousers and white shirts. I like that kind of thing."

Yucali: "So we want everyone to listen to HalCali's songs or watch our videos on YouTube. We'd like to get our message to British people, and we'd love to visit the UK. Thanks!"

tac

NIK WHITE INVESTIGATES MANGA ENTERTAINMENT'S LATEST SUPERNATURAL SERIES

Tactics began life as manga series serialized in the bi-monthly Japanese shounen/seinen magazine, published by Mag Garden, *Comic Blade Masamune*. This popular manga series owed a degree of its success to *Love Sick*, a short 72-page doujinshi that features an explicit scene between the two male series protagonists Haruka and Kantarou. While doujinshi are primarily works of amateurs, some professional artists participate as a way to publish material outside the regular industry. Under pseudonyms of Wasabi Katsuo and Wasabi Maguro, *Tactics* creators Sakura Kinoshita and Kazuko Higashiyama, respectively, formed the doujinshi circle Mad Cookie Monster. This circle has released numerous doujinshi based on their own series that often add a level of content that wouldn't be admissible in general high-street publications.

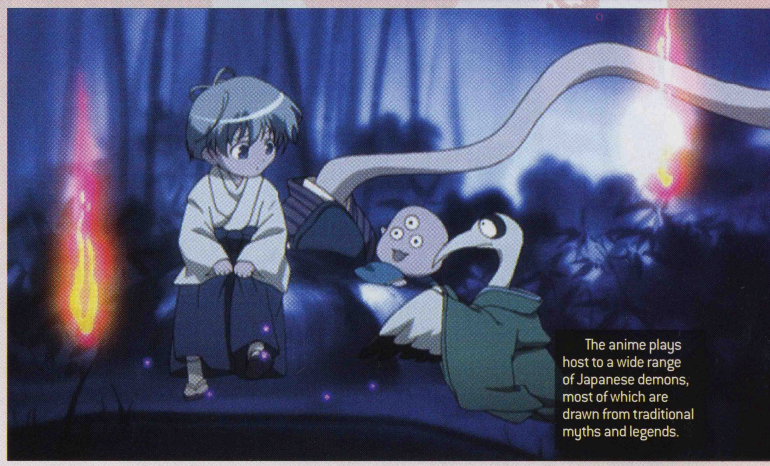
The initial volume of the *Tactics* manga was translated and released by ADV Manga in October 2004, with volume two being released in May of the following year. The final two concluding volumes fell foul, along with many other titles, of a permanent hiatus when they were placed on hold with no indication of when, or if they would ever return. In 2006, manga publisher TOKYOPOP announced that it had obtained the licences for *Aria*, *Tactics*, and *Peacemaker Kurogane*. TOKYOPOP's intention is to publish these three titles from their respective initial volumes rather then where ADV Manga left off. With the first TOKYOPOP volume of *Tactics* due on sale in the US in April of this year, the release has fuelled a glimmer of hope amongst fans of the numerous licenses that flounder in the hands of ADV Manga.

On October 5, 2004, the first episode of the animated adaptation premiered on Japanese television. This 25-episode series ran until March 29, 2005. Directed by Hiroshi Watanabe and featuring character designs courtesy of Mariko Oka, these two relatively unknown figures were overshadowed by the publicity that was directed at the animation studio that fuelled this project. Established in 1975 by members of animation studio Sunrise (*Universal Century Gundam*, *Inuyasha* and *Cowboy Bebop*), Studio DEEN has over 125 accredited titles including collaborations

translation notes

Although *Tactics* is licensed and released by Manga Entertainment – in both the United Kingdon and the United States – the English audio track was produced by ADV Studios. This means that popular English voice artists including Chris Patton, Jessica Boone, Luci Christian, Monica Rial, Vic Mignogna and Chris Ayres bring their vast experience to this production. As *Tactics* is based on Japanese folklore, the majority of referenced Japanese supernatural creatures don't feature in European folklore. This means that no direct English translation of oni, tengu, yokai and kitsune exist. Instead of choosing to leave these Japanese terms intact, ADV Studios has replaced these with demon, long-nosed demon, goblins and fox demon, respectively.

The legendary demon-fox known as kitsune served as the inspiration for Yoko's character.



The anime plays host to a wide range of Japanese demons, most of which are drawn from traditional myths and legends.

TCS

Yaoi & yōkai

with Sunrise on productions such as *Cowboy Bebop: The Movie*. Responsible for the production of *Fruits Basket*, *Patlabor: The Movie*, *Read or Die* and *R.O.D. TV*, and acting in a supporting role for Hayao Miyazaki's 75th Academy Award winning Best Animated Feature *Spirited Away*, Studio DEEN has put its 29 years of expertise to good use to bring life to this humorous and sometimes dark, supernatural, fantasy anime.

Fanciful folklore

Set during the 45-year reign of Japanese Emperor Meiji (1868-1912), Kantarou Ichinomiya has a sixth sense and can see goblins (yōkai) and other mystical beasts. A scholar who specialises in the documentation of Japanese folklore, Kantarou desperately searches for the legendary long-nosed goblin (tengu) whose powers are supposed to surpass that of any known demons. Rumoured to be sealed away by a curse, Kantarou makes it "his calling in life" to obtain the necessary strength to remove the magical bond that seals the long-nosed goblin in its presently unknown, accursed resting place. Moonlighting as a demon hunter, Kantarou spends the vast majority of his day attempting to circumnavigate his over zealous publisher and the sisterly nagging of his most unlikely compatriot – a fox-demon (kitsune) that he's given the name Yoko.

Acting on some highly reliable information, Kantarou comes across an abandoned and disused temple that, low-and-behold, plays sanctuary to the accursed shrine. Breaking the magical seal reveals the long-nosed demon that he vowed he would befriend since childhood. Given the name Haruka (a tengu cannot go against the will of the person who gave it its name), this impeccably dressed winged demon struggles to regain the memories of his past in the hope of discovering who imprisoned him and why he was sealed away. As these memories start to return, Haruka's relationship with Kantarou begins to show signs of stress. Sensing an opportunity to have Kantarou cancel the contract with Haruka, Minamoto Raiko, his band of soldiers and another formidable demon scheme and plot in the hope that the opportunity will arise where they can capture Haruka and present him to a mysterious power whose identity remains anonymous. If the contract between Kantarou and Haruka is not annulled or if the long-nosed demon's master dies, Haruka's powers would be forever restrained and he would become useless as a pawn to be played by the antagonists.

Release Information

Title: Tactics
Available: Now
Label: Manga Entertainment
Animation: Studio DEEN
Director: Hiroshi Watanabe
Key voice actors: Chris Patton, Monica Rial and Chris Ayres

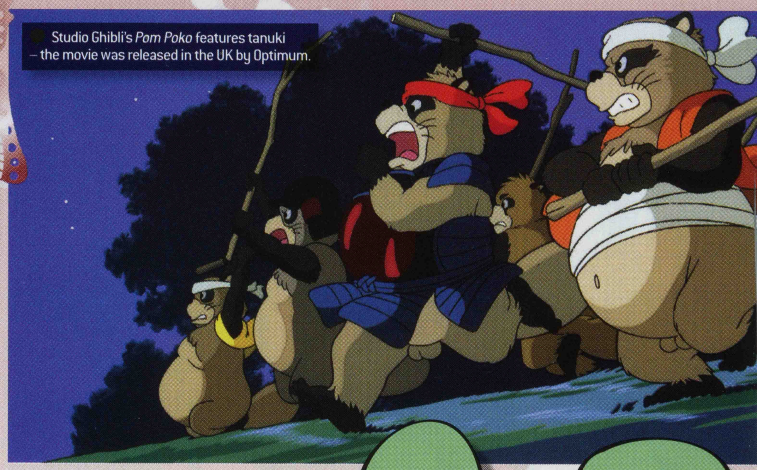
tactics

Shigeru Mizuki, creator of *Spooky Kentaro* (pictured) wrote a 500-page encyclopaedia of Japanese ghosts and so has helped to keep his country's rich folklore alive.

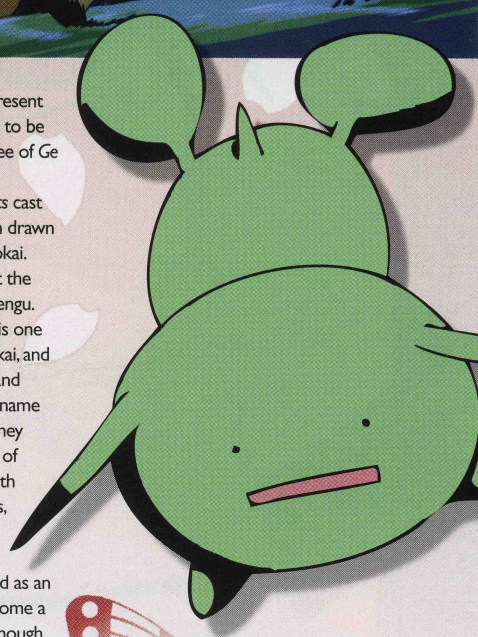
Demon days

The influences of Japanese folklore on anime and manga, and in particular the use of yōkai, is profound. Yōkai is a broad term that encompasses virtually all monsters and supernatural beings. Studio Ghibli make use of yōkai in three of their classic titles. In *Pom Poko* a cast of tanuki (a canid species native to Japan) transform themselves into a large number of yōkai inspired by classic Japanese art. *Princess Mononoke* includes numerous forest spirits given names of traditional yōkai, and *Spirited Away* features a bathhouse patronised by yōkai type spirits. The most popular modern use of yōkai features in the manga and anime adaptation of *Naruto*.

Several yōkai go under the fictional classification of tailed beasts due to their varying number of tails. The most famous of these is the nine-tailed demon fox or kitsune (a particular yōkai subcategory). The most noteworthy figure for keeping yōkai in the popular imagination is Shigeru Mizuki – the manga creator of Ge *Ge Ge no Kitaro* and *Sanpei no Kappa*. At this present time the only piece of Mizuki's work to be translated into English is volume three of *Ge Ge Ge no Kitaro*.



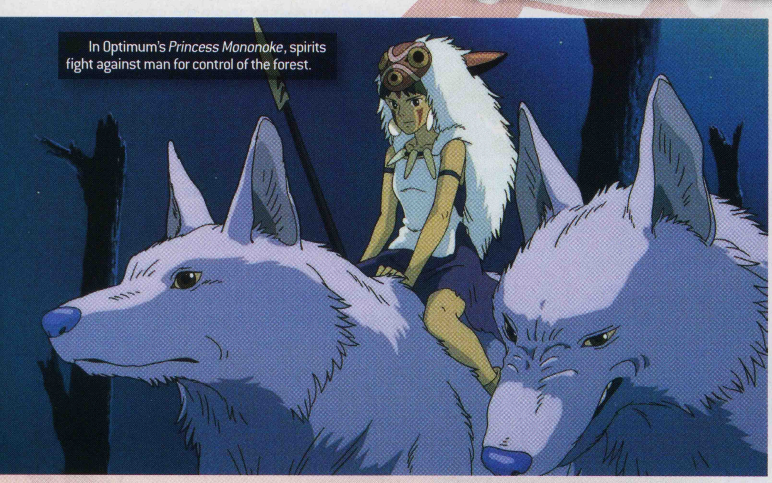
Studio Ghibli's *Pom Poko* features tanuki – the movie was released in the UK by Optimum.



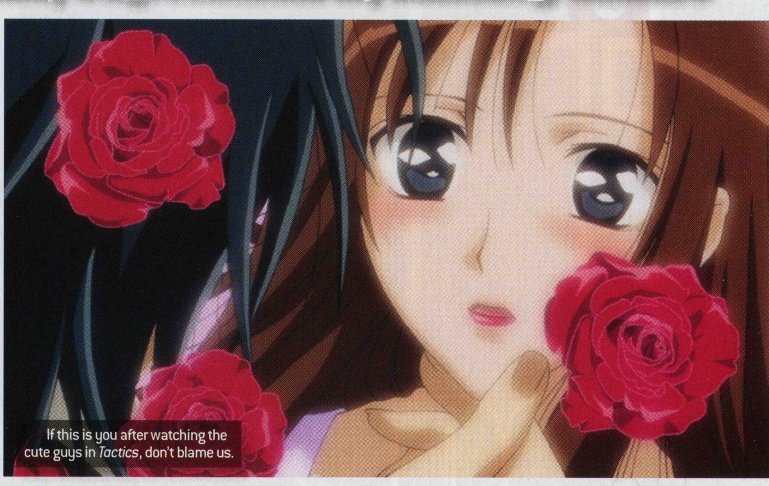
Numerous members of the *Tactics* cast have been modelled from inspiration drawn from the various subcategories of yōkai. The long-nosed demon, Haruka, isn't the typical physical representation of a tengu. Translated as 'heavenly dog', a tengu is one of the most popular variants of a yōkai, and prominently features in art, theatre and literature. Although tengu take their name from a canine-like Chinese demon, they were originally believed to be a type of bird of prey. Traditionally depicted with both human and avian characteristics, the earliest representations of this type of yōkai were often envisaged with beaks that were later humanised as an unnaturally long nose, which has become a defining characteristic of a tengu. Although Haruka is referred to as the long-nosed goblin, this dashing and fiercely handsome character is free from the elongated nose featured in Japanese mythology. The only real characteristic that defines his status as a tengu is his pair of jet black wings that conform to the human and avian theory.

Kantarou's unlikely compatriot, Yoko, is a member of a yōkai subcategory known as ghostly zoology. Yoko is modelled on a demon-fox known in Japanese mythology as a kitsune. In Japan a good number of animals were thought to have innate magic abilities

Studio DEEN has put its 29 years of expertise to good use to bring life to this humorous and sometimes dark, supernatural, fantasy anime



In Optimum's *Princess Mononoke*, spirits fight against man for control of the forest.



If this is you after watching the cute guys in *Tactics*, don't blame us.

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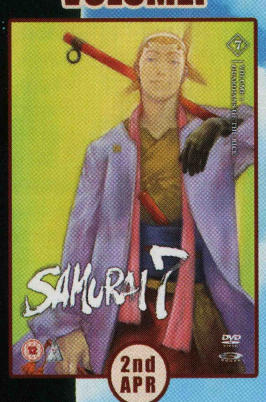

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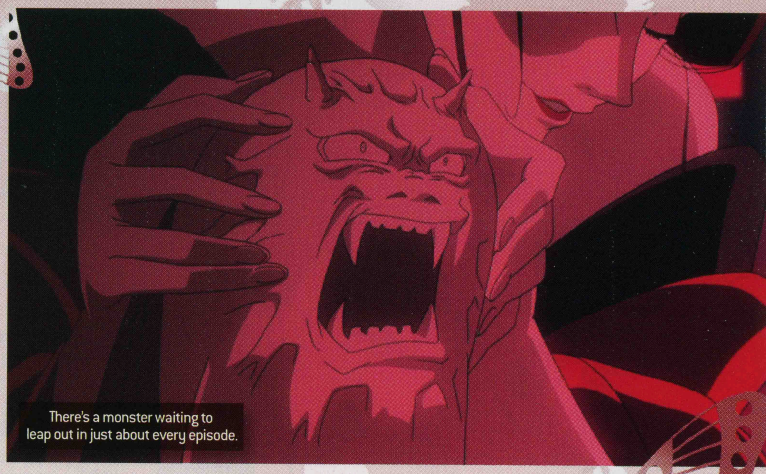
tactics

The series certainly doesn't lack pretty boys.



There's a monster waiting to leap out in just about every episode.

of their own. Most of these are 'henge' (shape shifters) which often primarily imitate women. Some of the better-known animal yōkai include: tanuki, kitsune (foxes), hebi (snakes), mujina bakeneko and nekomata (cats), Ōkami (wolves), and tsuchigumo (giant spiders). Yoko manifests her fox-like traits in a similar manner to the characters present in Natsuki Takaya's popular manga and anime adaptation *Fruits Basket*. During scenes of a heightened emotional tension Yoko will sprout ears from her impeccably styled barnet or, on occasion, can be found scampering around on all fours adding comedy value in some of *Tactics*' more colourful episodes.

Traditional roots

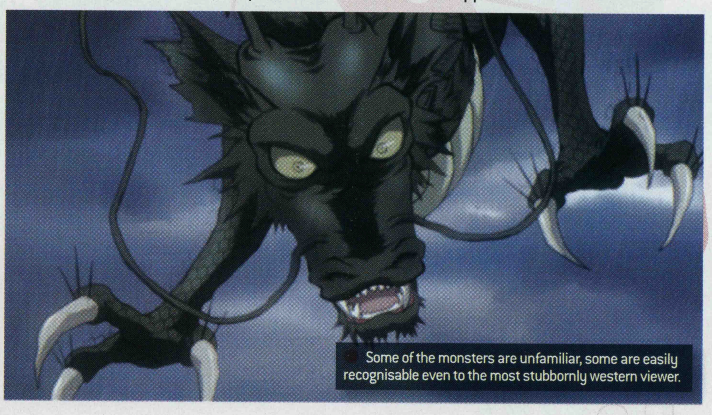
Tactics generally takes the form of the demon-of-week type of affair. Thankfully, the demons that come up for vanquish all have ties with Japanese folklore giving *Tactics* the edge over other series that have adopted a similar episode template. In the debut episode, 'The Black Tengu Awakens', Kantarou is faced with a demon with the ability to freeze its victims in a block of ice. Classified in Japanese mythology as a tsurara-onna, (an icicle woman) this demon is renowned for its practical jokes.

Episode three, 'A Fairy Tale of the Mountain', sees Kantarou and compatriots faced with a shenlong ('Dragon God') who's using the Japanese children's game, 'kagome, kagome' to source children with high spirit energy. In this game, one child is chosen as the oni (demon) and sits blindfolded or with his eyes covered. The remaining children all join hands, forming a circle, and walk around the oni while chanting the song for the game ("Kagome, kagome, the bird in the cage, when will you come out? In the evening of the dawn, the crane and turtle slipped. Who stands right behind you now?"). When the song stops, the child unlucky enough to be selected as oni speaks aloud the name of the person he guesses to be standing directly behind him. If the oni guesses correctly, then they will exchange places with the other child.

When a tree root is worshipped as a god in episode nine, 'Yome Island Mystery Tale', a conclusion is drawn that the root symbolises underground living, which indirectly signifies rats. As tree root is "ne" in Japanese and is also a rat in the Chinese zodiac, a reference is made to Tesso – the ghost of the priest Raigō, who transformed into a swarm of rats. *Tactics* isn't the first anime to include a reference to Tesso. In episode 91 of the anime adaptation of Rumiko Takahashi's *Inuyasha*, Tesso misleads villagers into believing that Kuroro is an evil demon that must be exterminated. (See page 068 for our review of *Inuyasha*.)

Yet another piece of trivia can be unearthed from the final episode of volume one. Episode 13, entitled 'The Nightmare in the Sea of Trees', sees an army unit discovering the wreck of the Japanese cruiser Unebi. The Unebi was a protected cruiser of the Imperial Japanese Navy; built for the Japanese in Great Britain. It was named after a mountain in Nara prefecture, located near the ancient capital of Asuka. Per Meiji period State Shinto mythology, this mountain was home to Japan's first Emperor, Jimmu Tenno. Just three months after being commissioned, in December 1886, while in route to Japan, the Unebi disappeared without a trace somewhere in the South China Sea between Singapore and Yokohama. No survivors and no wreckage were ever found, and theories on its mysterious disappearance have led to numerous novels and works of speculative fiction. The Unebi remains the only case of a ship vanishing without a trace in the annals of the Imperial Japanese Navy.

With this 25 episode series spread over two value packed volumes, *Tactics* delivers 600 minutes of cultural and mythological references along with a cast of male characters who effortlessly flutter women's hearts. If that alone isn't enough to tempt the cultural enthusiast or swooning fan-girl within, then the prospect of a dark, emotional and, at times, humorous series should see you familiarise yourself with *Tactics* as it appears on store shelves. ■



Some of the monsters are unfamiliar, some are easily recognisable even to the most stubbornly western viewer.

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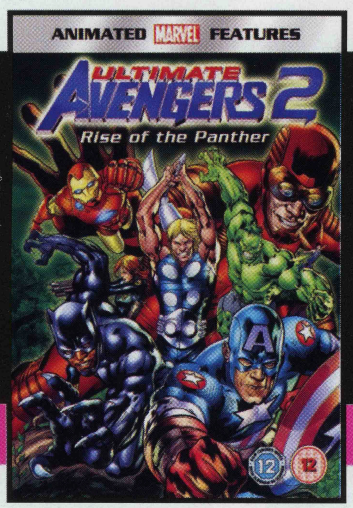

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THE FRACTURED MIND

The critics hated it and audiences have been sharply divided – but then it is a film all about being split in two. NEO's David West takes at look at *Takeshis'*, the latest mind trip from Takeshi Kitano

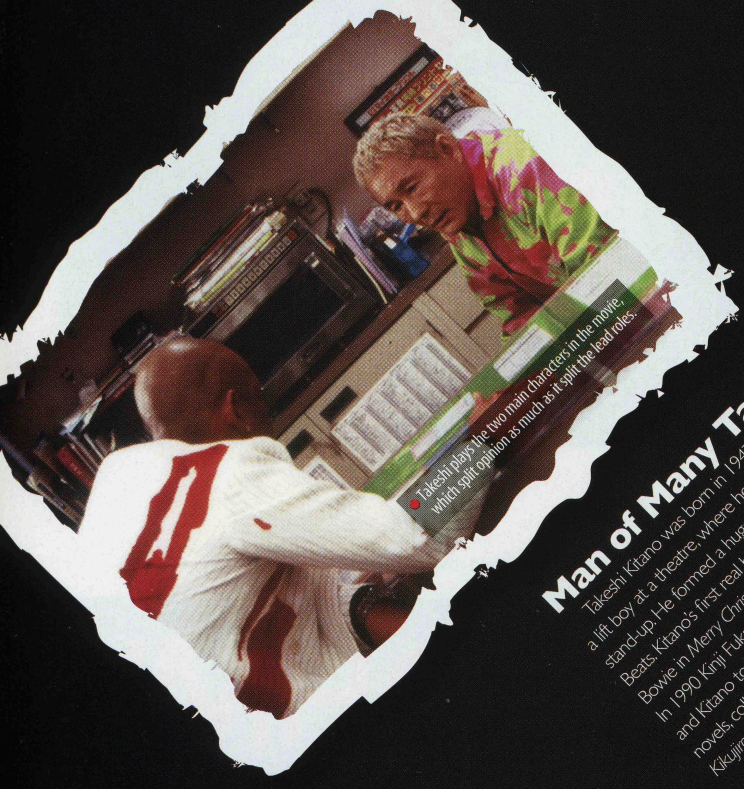
Takeshi Kitano has never been afraid of controversy. When he was part of the stand-up comedy duo Two Beats, he provoked outrage in Japan by tackling taboo subjects in his profanity-filled rants, one of which, when he performed it live on TV, saw him banned from the premises of station NHK for a year. As a filmmaker he was best known in the west for his violent thrillers *Boiling Point* and *Hana-Bi*, until the international success of *Zatoichi*, his re-working of the character made famous by Shintaro Katsu, in 2003. *Zatoichi* was Kitano's biggest box-office success in Japan and finally gave him the clout he needed to make his most challenging film thus far, *Takeshis'*.

The genesis of the film was a project called *Fractal* that Kitano had been developing for years, since his fourth film as director, 1993's *Sonatine*. However, he was unable to convince his financial backers that the idea had any commercial potential.

Let Them Eat Cake

"It's a story about an ordinary guy and events happening around him," explains Takeshi Kitano, "but at a certain point it takes on a weird twist. He enters into an imaginary world in his consciousness, where he sees himself entering into yet another imaginary world, where he, again, sees himself entering into yet another world and so on and on. The story unfolds as it interweaves between his real time actions and imaginary worlds in his consciousness, multi-layered like a Baumkuchen cake."

Confused by the premise and surprisingly unmoved by the promise of cake, no one would give Kitano the green light for *Fractal*.



Takeshi plays the two main characters in the movie, which split opinion as much as it split the lead roles.

Man of Many Talents

Takeshi Kitano was born in 1947 in post-World War II Tokyo. He worked odd jobs until he was hired as a lift boy at a theatre, where he met comedian Fukami Senzaburo, who helped Kitano get his first gig as a stand-up. He formed a hugely successful partnership with another young comic, Kaneko Kiyoshi, as the Two Beats. Kitano's first real break into the movie business came when Nagisa Oshima cast him opposite David Bowie in *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* in 1983 as the sadistic Sergeant in charge of a prisoner-of-war camp. In 1990 Kinji Fukasaku (*Battle Royale*) cast Kitano in *Violent Cop*, but Fukasaku fell ill during pre-production and Kitano took over, becoming a film director on the spot. His other accomplishments include several novels, collections of poetry, presenting various TV shows, and painting. His art can be seen in *I Hana-Bi* and *Kikujiro*. Show off.

Takeshis' – a car that even Kitano can't drive?

Kitano's movie is incredibly challenging to the general audience – has the director bitten off more than he can chew with this latest flick?

Consequently, he changed the title, re-wrote the story and cast himself in the two lead roles. Then he went back to his producers, still expecting them to turn him down. Kitano recalls: "When I asked them 'Guys, about that *Fractal* movie, I decided to play the main character myself rather than cast another actor. And also, I simplified the storyline a great deal. What do you think?' they immediately replied, 'That sounds great. Let's do it!'"

The first time the project was announced to the public was at the Cannes Film Festival in 2005, with a black banner reading "*Takeshis*" with the tag line "500% Kitano – nothing to add". Obtuse but somehow spot on. The movie sees Kitano and his co-stars playing dual roles. Firstly there's Kitano taking on his public persona as the arrogant movie star Beat Takeshi (the stage name he first adopted as a stand-up comic). On the other hand, he doubles as a shy convenience store worker called Kitano who dreams of being a famous actor like his namesake. As Kitano is rejected in audition after audition, he becomes increasingly lost in a fantasy world in which he assumes a variety of Takeshi's onscreen personae. The line between real and imaginary strains to breaking point; Beat Takeshi could be a figment of Kitano's mind, the man he dreams of becoming. Contrarily, meek Kitano represents the man that Takeshi might have become if he'd never made it as a star. When Kitano brings home a bag of guns as props for a role he wants to audition for, are the guns just imitations or are they real and loaded with live ammo? Reality is what you make it, as least it is when you're both filmmaker and star in your own universe.

In *Zatoichi* Kitano deconstructed the chambara film, constantly asserting his presence as a filmmaker by playing with the motifs of the genre while his onscreen *ciphet* remained aloof and detached from everything happening around him. The final dance sequence was a perfect example of this, taking a standard genre element, the happy peasants singing and dancing having been saved by the hero, to its illogical conclusion, performing straight to camera on a stage. *Takeshis'* sees the filmmaker push the boundaries of this technique to their very limit. It's a film about Kitano's other films, about his screen persona, and his public image. As such, anyone new to the director's work would be well advised to start with his earlier films rather than jumping straight in at the deep end here.

Weirder Than Expected

"I reconstructed the story with my utmost intricacy before I set out for shooting," says Kitano, "but as it turned out, my notorious habit of wanting spontaneity reared its nasty head again and again while shooting and editing." The movie is densely constructed and Kitano's trademarks are all in place, with moments of quiet stillness punctuated by sudden bursts of violence. There's plenty of absurd humour, which fits right in with the overall surreal tone of the movie.

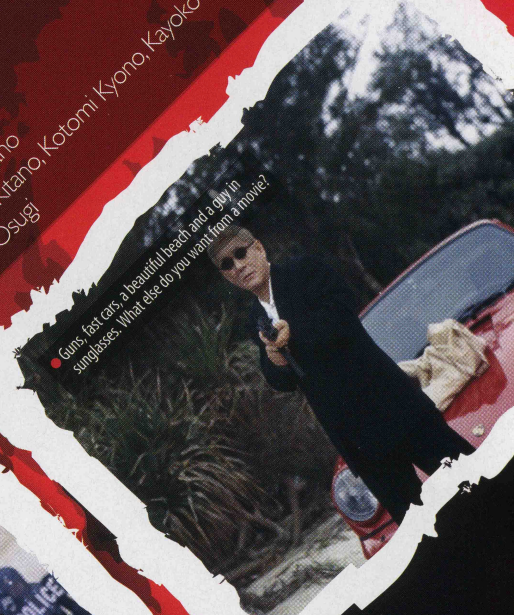
"When I finally completed the project, what I felt was not so much a sense of having accomplished what I had always wanted for ages," says the director, "but rather, every time I review the completed film, I am surprised by the strange universe I created on the big screen and how it turned out to be way weirder than I had expected, despite the fact that I made the film myself."

When *Takeshis'* debuted at the Venice Film Festival, the reaction from critics and the audience was cool to say the least. "I set out to make a strange, groundbreaking film, and I think it succeeds," he told the press after the screening, "but it feels like I made a car that's so fast I couldn't drive it and fell out." Perhaps because it came after Kitano's most readily accessible film, *Zatoichi*, expectations of another similarly commercial movie meant that no one was quite prepared for *Takeshis'*. Aside from all the references to Kitano's own movies, there are nods to Frederico Fellini's *8 1/2*, another movie about the frustrations of a film director that flipped between the real and the imagined. *Takeshis'* is Kitano's most personal film and for anyone who has enjoyed his work in the past, it provides an insight into Kitano's mind. If that's a strange and confusing place, that shouldn't really come as too much of a surprise.

Release Information

Title: *Takeshis'*
Available: July (TBC)
Label: Artificial Eye
Director: Takeshi Kitano
Key actors: Takeshi Kitano, Kotomi Kyono, Kayoko Kishimoto, Ren Osugi

The film plays with reality until no one is sure what's real.



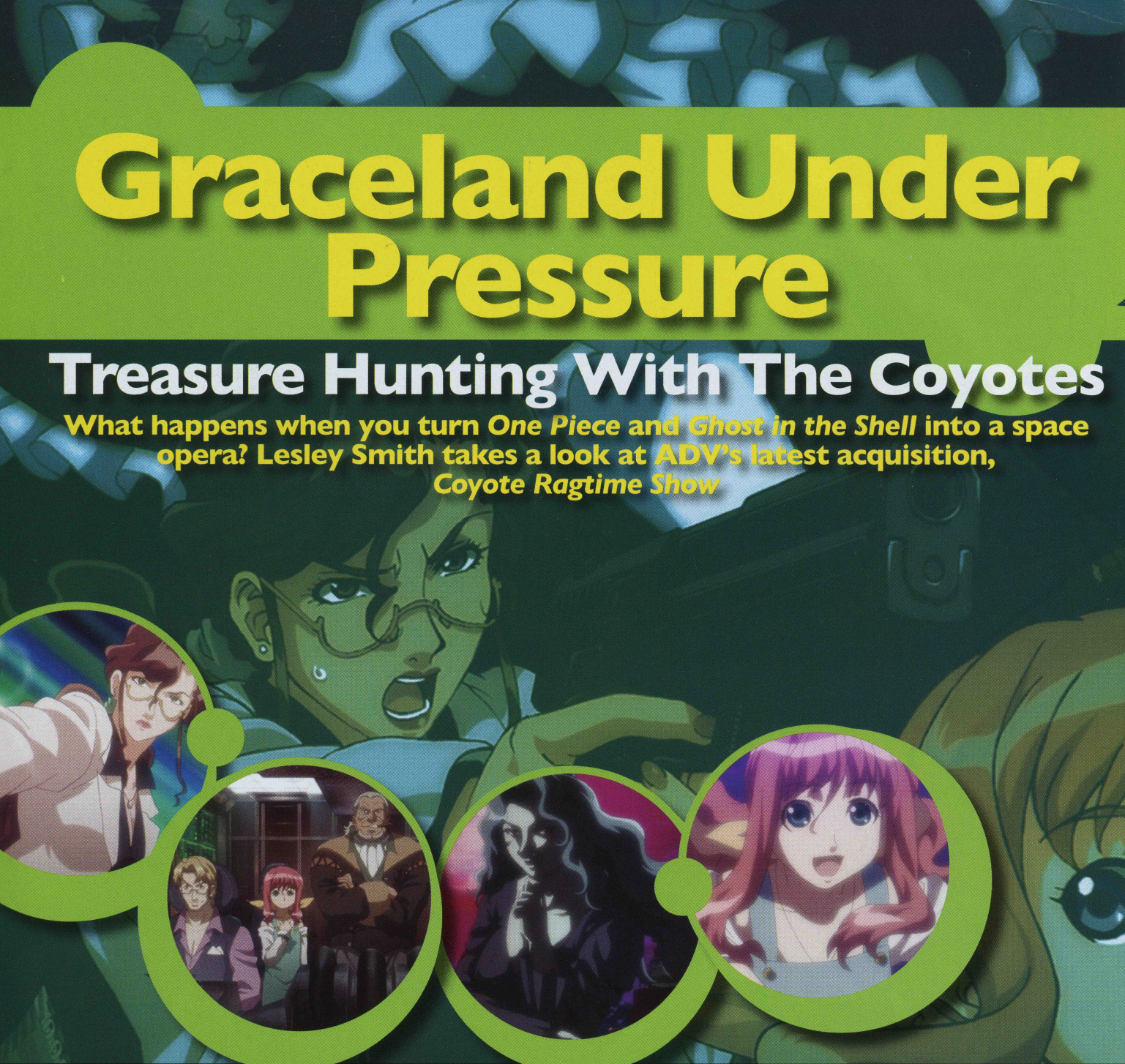
Guns, fast cars, a beautiful beach and a guy in sunglasses. What else do you want from a movie?

"I set out to make a strange, groundbreaking film, and I think it succeeds, but it feels like I made a car that's so fast I couldn't drive it and fell out." Takeshi Kitano

Graceland Under Pressure

Treasure Hunting With The Coyotes

What happens when you turn *One Piece* and *Ghost in the Shell* into a space opera? Lesley Smith takes a look at ADV's latest acquisition, *Coyote Ragtime Show*



A dash of Monkey D. Luffy, a glug of *GITS*, an ounce of *Galaxy Express 666*, a good measure of *Chobits* and what do you get? A riveting space opera with pirates, guns, robotic assassins and a frantic chase across the universe on the hunt for fabled treasure: ten million space dollars that can only be found by a young girl and her pendant, on a planet that's about to be destroyed.

Coyote Ragtime Show originally aired on Japanese TV in 2006 and followed the adventures of the Coyote Gang and their leader Mister as they searched for the fabled treasure of the recently deceased Pirate King, Bruce, which was hidden on a planet teetering on the edge of destruction. This planet was named Graceland, and was scheduled to be blown out of the heavens in a week. But Mister and his gang were also being pursued by the Criminal Guild's notorious assassins, 12 deadly robotic sisters named after the months of the year; plus Angelica Burns, an inspector of the Milky Way Federation with a grudge and a worrying dependency on snacks.

Beautifully animated by the oddly named Ufotable, *Coyote Ragtime Show* is well named, as its protagonists are a ragbag collection of miscreants who nevertheless stick together through adversity. Key to Mister's plans to get King Bruce's gold is his daughter Franca. This pink haired cherub is a loyal Coyote who has been running Mister's bar Pirate since witnessing her father's murder three years previously at the hands of Madame Marciano, leader of the Criminal Guild. While she sometimes feels used by the crew, without her and the mysterious pendent she wears, they have no chance of finding the treasure.

On the flip side are Angelica Burns and her insanely young protégé, a cop with a remarkable memory named Chelsea Muir. Burns spent four years searching for Mister and finally tracked him down to a penitentiary on the backwater world of Sandvil, a desert world infested with giant insects. The arch criminal is a few days short of release after serving time for a minor traffic violation and has managed to remain hidden within the penal system, his true identity unknown, when two of his crewmates break him out. Now the two ladies of the law are determined to catch Mister and his crew if it's the last thing they do. Although, given Burns' fascination with food, and the fact she offers candy bars rather than cigarettes to those she meets,

Ten million space dollars are up for grabs, and can only be found by a young girl and her pendant.

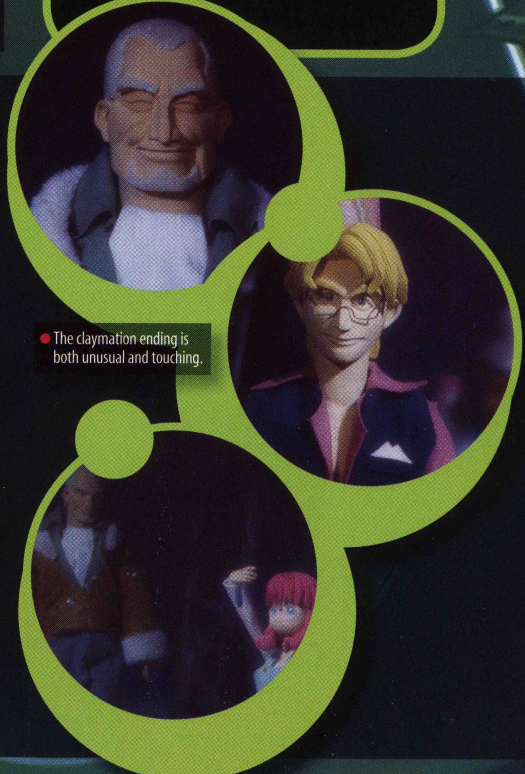
Coyote Ragtime Show © 2006 ufotable * coyote project ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Release Information

Available:	2 April
Label:	ADV
Director:	Takuya Nonaka
Production:	Ufotable
Key voice actors:	Akio Ohtsuka and John Swasey as Mister, Ryou Hirohashi and Brittney Karbowski as Franca

Coyote Claymation

The most striking thing about the series, aside from the breathtaking pace and animation, is actually the ending sequence. Created using claymation, a method seldom seen in Japan, it focuses on Franca and Mister. Set in the Pirate bar, Mister sits drinking whiskey on the rocks with Bishop and Bruce while pink-haired Franca stands outside, gazing at her crystal pendant as it reflects the moonlight. A touching example of the power of clay, it is perfectly synchronised to Sana's haunting ending song Usuragu Kioku and has to be one of the most unique ending credits we've ever seen.



The claymation ending is both unusual and touching.

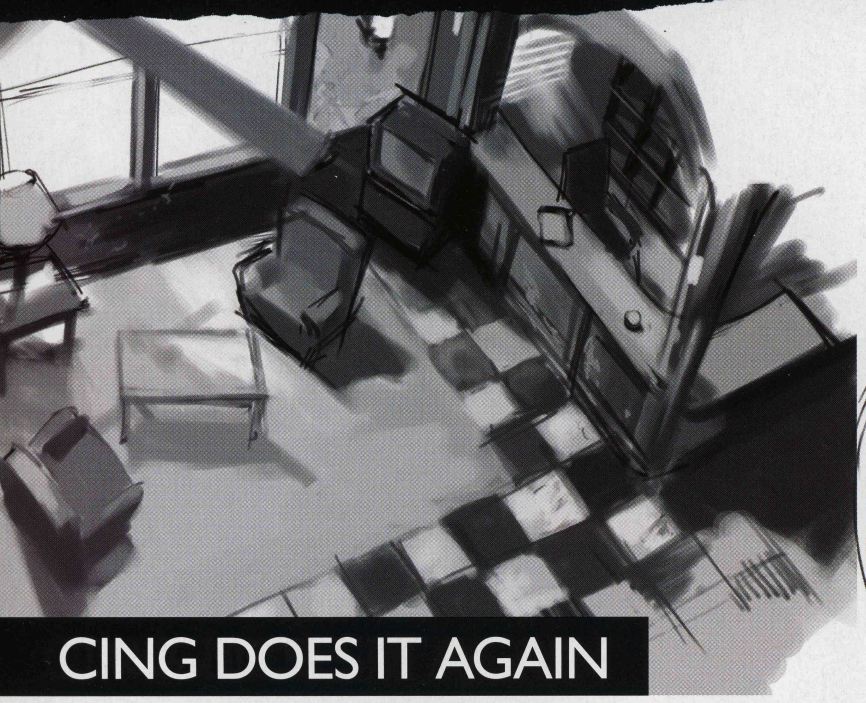
we think Angelica Burns' last act will probably be to chow down on something sweet…

A rollercoaster ride, *Coyote Ragtime Show*'s 12 episodes see the crew running around the galaxy in a hail of bullets and surrounded by a cloud of Lolita robots. Yes… robots. Marciano's 12 android 'daughters' are without a doubt the most startling feature of the series. Created by Nielsen, Marciano's scientist henchman, each of the SISTERs is named after a month in the Gregorian calendar and, despite their childlike appearances, they come packed with high-calibre weaponry and an attitude to match. For example, January is eager to settle a grudge with the Coyotes, April on the other hand is fiercely loyal to her siblings and May is cruel and almost sadistic. July has a smile and, unlike her sisters, she seems nice, but looks can be deceptive… Finally three of the sisters are identical triplets and just love having fun; treating their mission as a game.

By now you're probably wondering what the deal with Graceland is. The planet is in the middle of a civil war, and the Federation is taking the fracas very seriously. Rather than negotiate, they're just going to nuke the planet and the treasure that just happens to be hidden there. While the story's focus is split between the Coyotes, the Criminal Guild and Angelica and Chelsea, the events on the world of Graceland are at the core. Some members of the Federation are honest, but most are corrupt and greedy, using their power for their own gains. Even the President, the man with the power to blow Graceland out of the sky, is in on the sleaze. Although the audience never really meets him, the progression of political events can be followed in his various broadcasts which litter the episodes (beginning with Angelica Burns' trip to Sandvil), and we do know he is just as corrupt as his many subordinates.

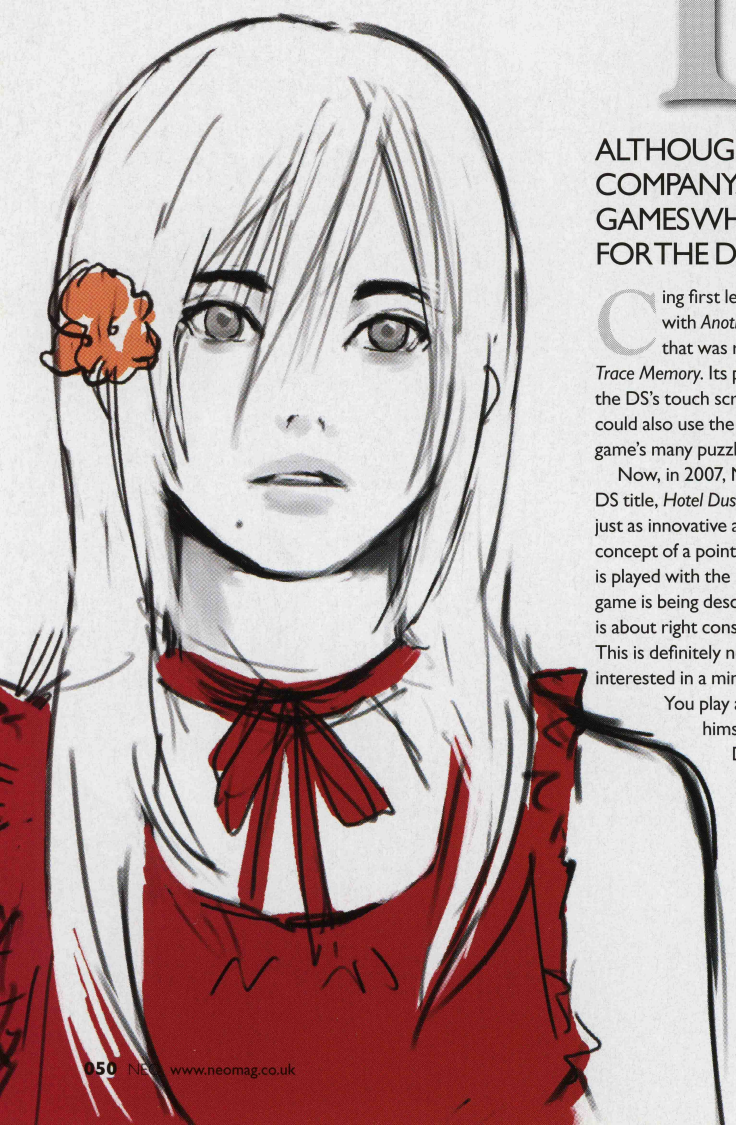
If Graceland makes you think of the great King of rock 'n' roll (Elvis... who did you think we meant?) then you're right. Director Takuya Nonaka originally intended the series' main villains to be a group of Elvis impersonators. He even attempted to get permission to use The King's songs in the series, but alas, it was not to be (or maybe that's a good thing – we'll leave it up to you to decide). All that remains of Nonaka's original concept is the use of the word 'Graceland,' the name of Elvis's infamous Memphis estate, as the name of the treasure planet.

With a title that accurately sums up the show and its bunch of pirates, robot assassins, cops and criminals, this series is brilliant and well worth repeated viewings for its nail-biting chases and plethora of jokes. A weird and wonderful take on a space opera, *Coyote Ragtime Show* takes all the best from a range of genres, throws them in a melting pot and comes out with pure anime gold.



CING DOES IT AGAIN

HOTEL DUSK



ALTHOUGH CING IS JUST A SMALL GAMES DEVELOPMENT COMPANY, IT HAS MANAGED TO CHURN OUT TWO GAMES WHICH HAVE CREATED A WHOLE NEW GENRE FOR THE DS. NEO INVESTIGATES ITS LATEST OFFERING

Cing first leapt onto the centre stage in 2005 with *Another Code: Two Memories*, a DS title that was released in the US under the name of *Trace Memory*. Its point and click adventure style utilised the DS's touch screen to great advantage, and players could also use the microphone to solve some of the game's many puzzles.

Now, in 2007, Nintendo has published Cing's latest DS title, *Hotel Dusk: Room 215*, and it's proving to be just as innovative as its predecessor. Based on the same concept of a point and click adventure game, the game is played with the DS on its side, held like a book. The game is being described as an 'interactive novel' – which is about right considering the amount of text involved. This is definitely not something to pick up if you're only interested in a mindless five-minute diversion.

You play as Kyle Hyde, an ex-cop who finds himself at the titular Hotel Dusk on 28 December 1979, staying in room 215 – the so-called 'wish' room. Kyle left the police force after a run in with his ex-partner, Bradley, who betrayed his fellow officers after selling information to a criminal organisation. The game opens with a scene in which Kyle confronts Bradley at the docks and shoots him. The body is never found, and Kyle quits the force to work as a salesman for Ed Vincent's company, Red Crown. Ed runs a sideline, helping people to 'find things', and Kyle assists from time to time. However, Kyle has things of his own to search out, and as the story unfolds it becomes obvious that Hotel Dusk is no ordinary place, and each of the residents have their own secrets.

Using film noir visuals, sketch animation and a few quirky touches, the game pulls you into a mystery story as you interact with the characters who are staying in Hotel Dusk. The game is littered with conversations that involve asking questions and responding in the correct way, and taking the wrong tack in some situations can lead to a game over. For example, at the opening of the game you meet a little girl on a staircase. If you want to get past her, it's best not to provoke her or you could face starting all over again.

The game features several different ending scenes depending on the way you play, which means it does have some replay value if you have a high tolerance for the wordy conversations. It's not all about text based nattering though, as there are plenty of puzzles that put the DS's touch screen to excellent use. It's really Cing's use of the DS that makes this game so interesting, as well as the fantastically written script, which brings each character to life. It's games like this that show the true potential of the DS to both gamers and developers alike – it's easy to see why so many games journalists consider the DS to be the greatest handheld console in gaming history.

DUSKING FOR CLUES

HOTEL DUSK MANAGES TO CRAM IN PLENTY OF INTERESTING GAMEPLAY FEATURES. HERE ARE A FEW OF NEO'S FAVOURITES

NEO GIVEAWAY

Answer our question correctly and you could win our grand prize of a copy of *Hotel Dusk*, a DS Lite and a piece of signed artwork. Four runners up will also receive a copy of the game each.

This piece of artwork is a limited edition print signed by members of the development team – we only have one to give away with a DS console, so get your answers in for your chance to get your grubby little hands on it!

Who did Kyle shoot at the beginning of the game?

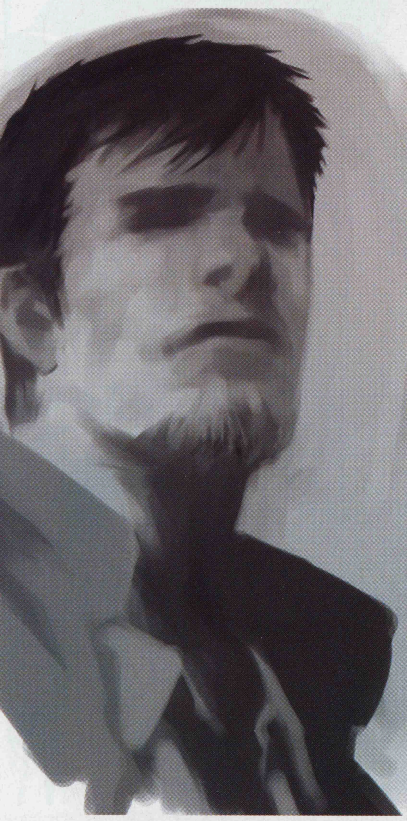
A: Himself after he gained a stone following Christmas

B: His partner, Bradley, following his betrayal

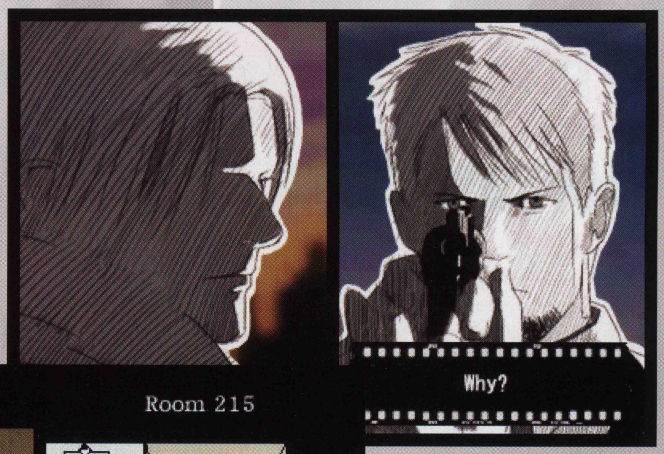
C: The butler, just for fun

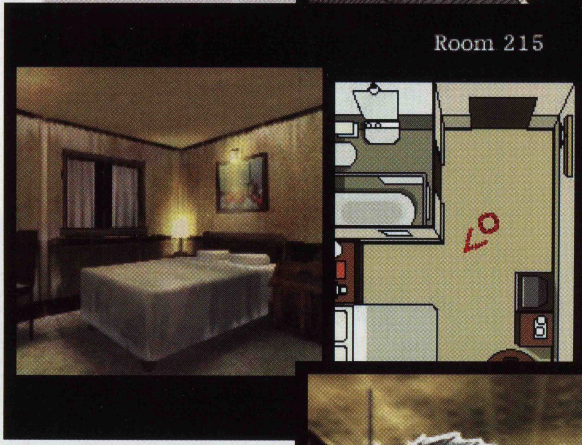
If your detective skills have honed in on the correct answer, write it down on a postcard and send it to the editorial address printed on page 005, addressed to: NEO 31 Hotel Dusk Competition.

Please see our competitions page on 098 for more terms and conditions. Closing date: 01 May '07.



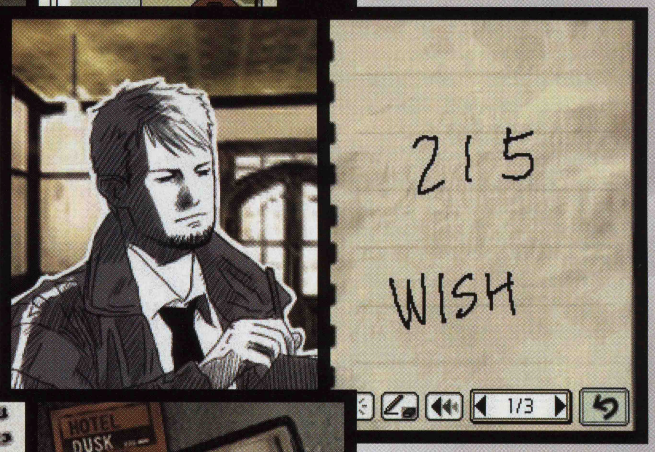
For the many extended cutscenes, the game uses both of the console's dual screens, and during conversations the character Kyle is talking to is displayed on the right, whilst Kyle's reactions are on the left. In its early days, many considered the DS's double screens to be a pointless gimmick, which would be underused by imagination-strapped designers. Pah, we say.

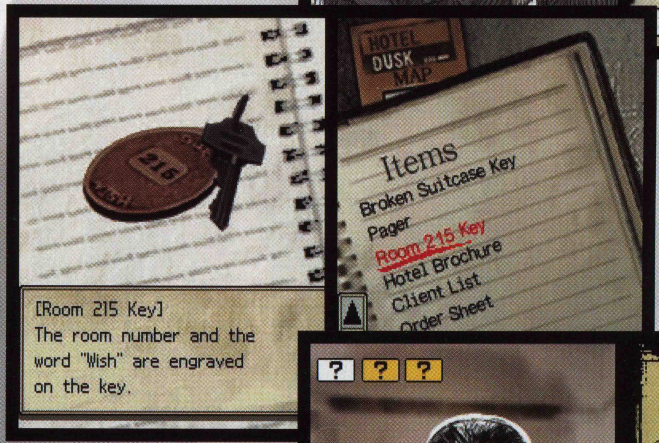




In order to move around the game, the stylus is used on the touch screen, which displays a map. On the other screen, you can watch a first person, 3D rendition of the hotel as you move around. Using the game's map to plot your movements is an unusual method but actually it works pretty well in *Hotel Dusk*.

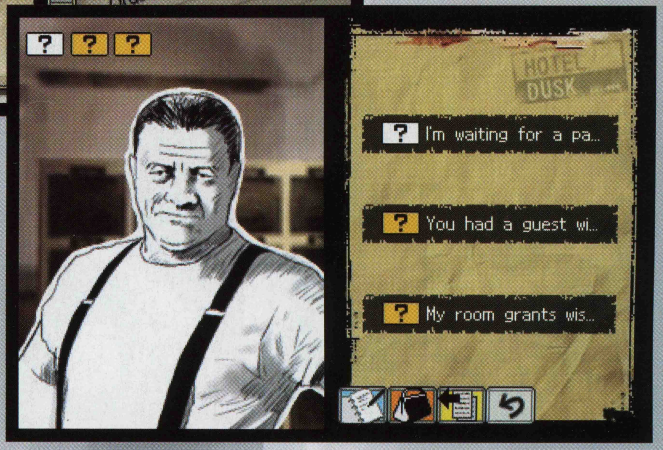
The game uses the touch screen to allow you to write notes for yourself in Kyle's notebook. You can make up to three pages of notes, and erase things at any time. Pretty darn nifty, and especially useful for the tricky process of detecting. You can fill the notepad up with doodles, of course, but there are plenty of things you'll want to remember.





As you progress through the story you'll pick up various items, which you can use yourself or show to other hotel guests. Just beware of showing the wrong thing to the wrong person, or you might find yourself kicked out. Here the screen shows the key to room 215 – just what is the real story behind its wishes?

Dunning is the hotel's grouchy owner and the first person you meet in the game. He tells Kyle the story behind the nicknames for the rooms, claiming that residents of 215 find their wishes have been granted. When your conversation has run its course, you have the opportunity to ask questions about what you've learned so far.



TOKYOPOP MANGA PREVIEW

Part Three

NEO EXCLUSIVE MANGA SERIALISATION!

ARCHLORD

RELEASE DATE:	April
LABEL:	TOKYOPOP
GENRE:	Action fantasy
RETAIL PRICE:	£6.99
SERIES LENGTH:	3 volumes
AUTHOR:	Jin-Hwan Park

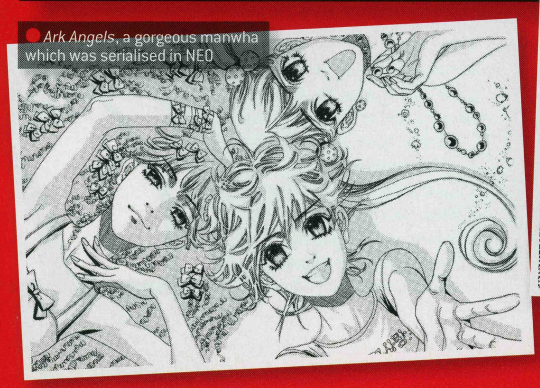
NEO has already played host to two instalments of the *ArchLord* serialisation, and this is the third and final. Don't forget to check out volume one of this manga in April!

This manwha was originally published in 2005 and was created by Jin-Hwan Park. Manwha is basically a term used to describe comics of Korean origin. (Chinese manga is termed 'manhua'.) Manwha titles are known for their similarity in style to Japanese manga – although it's inaccurate to claim that either has a distinct style as they both cover so many different techniques by a huge host of artists.

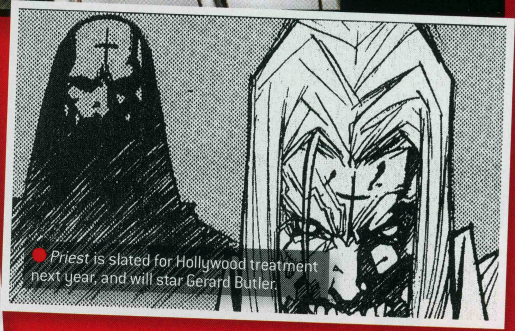
These Korean comics are presented in the same way as English language comics, read from left to right, so don't pose as many problems for publishers. As well as this, written Korean can be read either vertically or horizontally, so text isn't as difficult to accommodate on the page.

In the US, the most popular manwha titles include *Ragnarok* by Myong-Jin Lee, and *Priest* by Min-Woo Hyung. TOKYOPOP's *Priest*, as many NEO readers will know, has been picked up for a Hollywood movie remake, and new volumes of the manwha have been commissioned to prepare the storyline for the silver screen. Although Hollywood adaptations are obviously few and far between for manwha, in actual fact the live action route is far more common for adaptations of the medium, as few manwha stories are made into animations. Other titles NEO readers may recognise include *Faeries' Landing* by Hyun You, *Ark Angels* (a previous serialisation) by Eun-Ha Jo and Sang-Sun Park, and *My Sassy Girl* by Ho Sik Kim and Dae Hong Min. *My Sassy Girl* was remade as a hugely successful film in its native South Korea, and later this year another Hollywood remake is in the offing, reportedly to star *24*'s Elisha Cuthbert and Jesse Bradford, who had parts in *Hackers* and *Romeo + Juliet*.

Manwha titles embrace a range of different genres, just as manga does, and even if you've never been tempted to pick up a manwha title before, try something new and give it a shot!



Ark Angels, a gorgeous manwha which was serialised in NEO



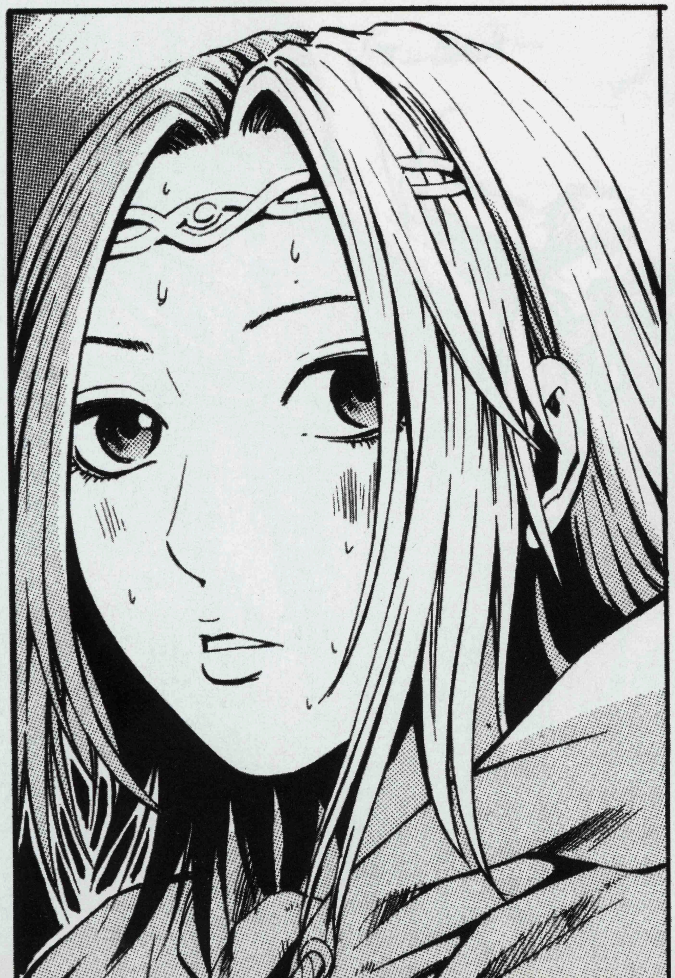
Priest is slated for Hollywood treatment next year, and will star Gerard Butler.

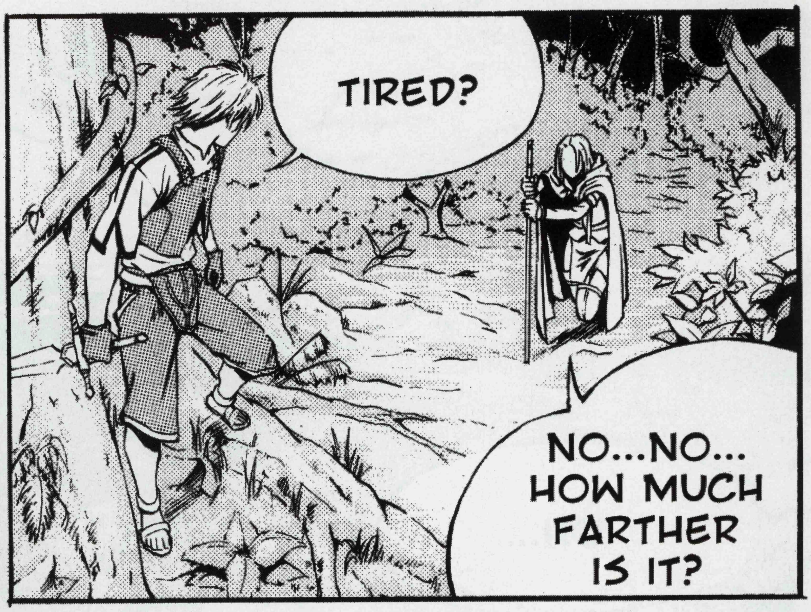
© Jin-Hwan Park and TOKYOPOP Inc. Reprinted courtesy of TOKYOPOP Inc.

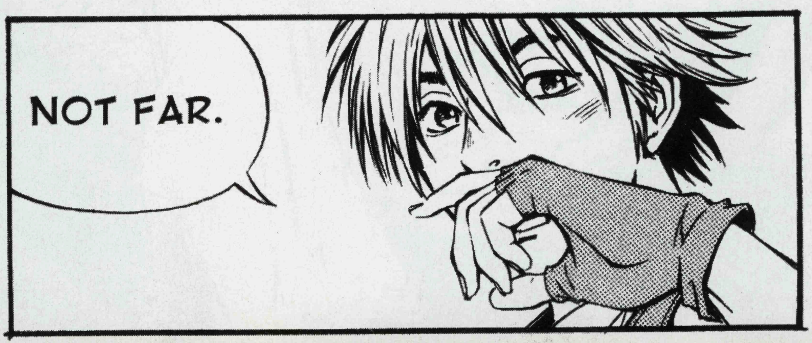
KARKUF DAGRIZURZ!
EIO
MOK-UUUUURZ BAALAK...
TRESPASSERS THROUGH TAAS FOREST PAY WITH BLOOD! GRISH-IRZI!

AZZZZ LAT!
BLAZING WALL!

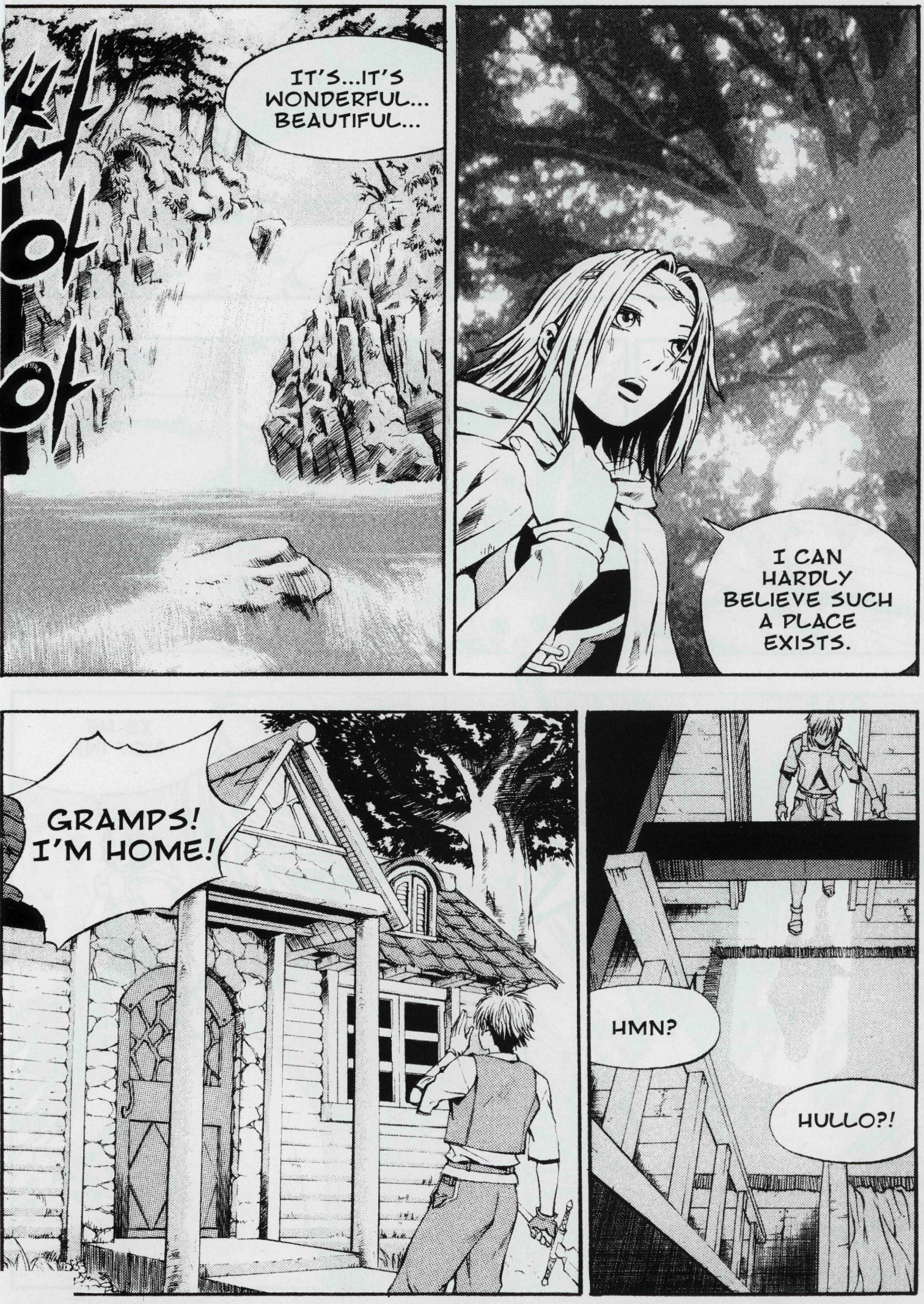
AH AH

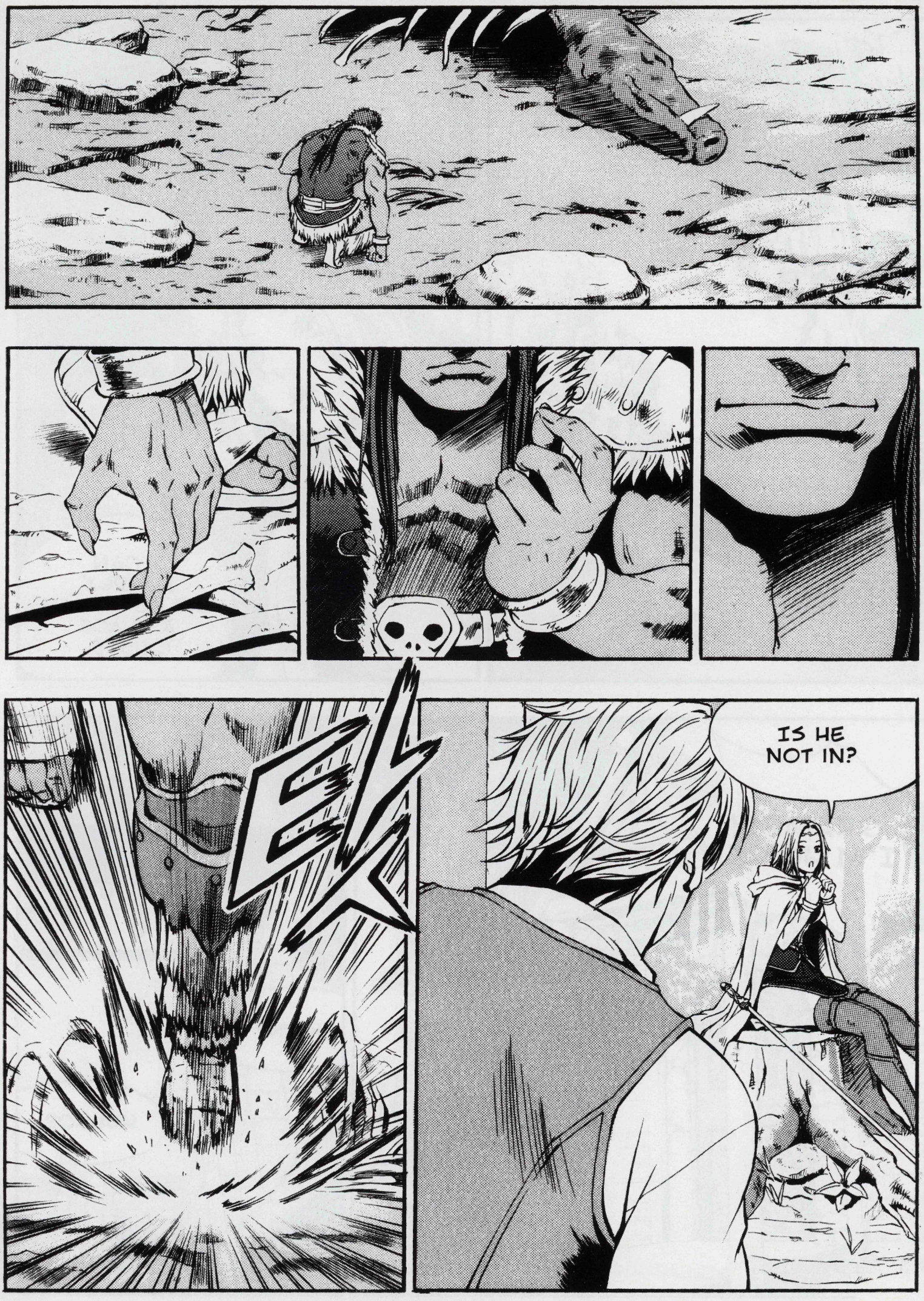


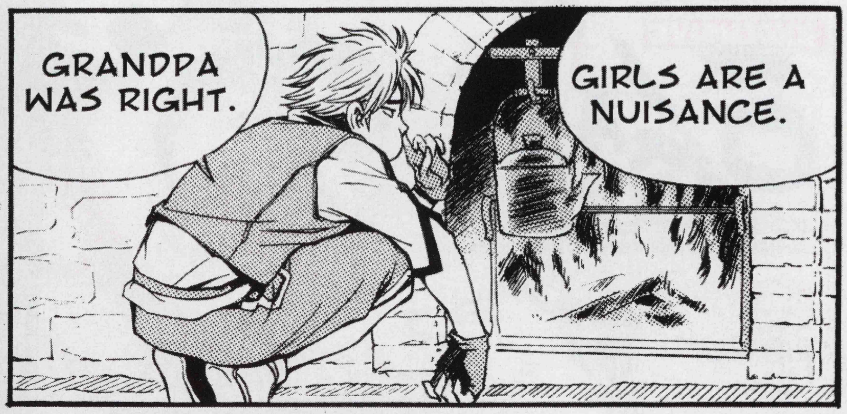

TIRED?
NO...NO... HOW MUCH FARTHER IS IT?

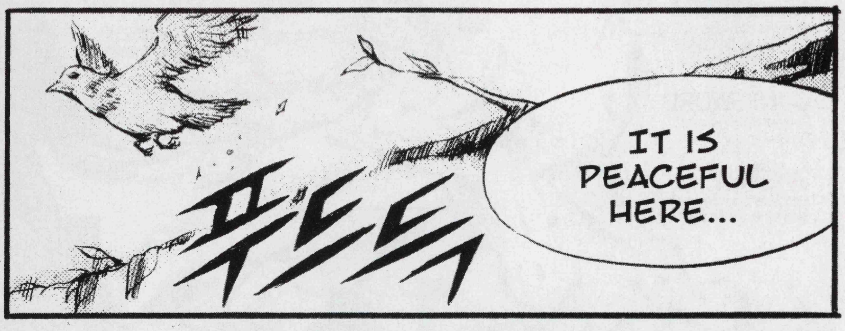

NOT FAR.

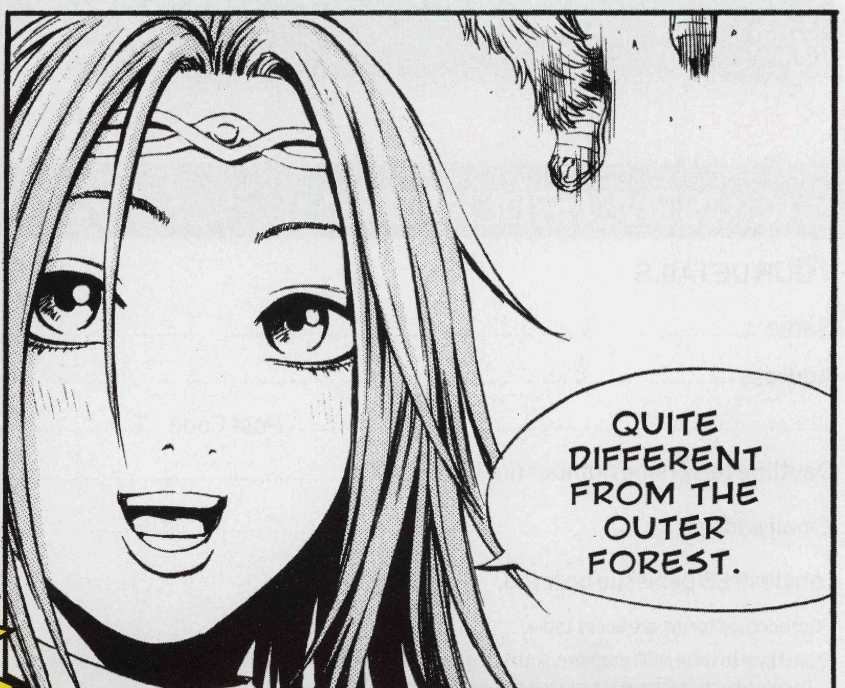
OH...


IT'S...IT'S WONDERFUL... BEAUTIFUL...
I CAN HARDLY BELIEVE SUCH A PLACE EXISTS.
GRAMPS! I'M HOME!
HMN?
HULLO?!


EK
IS HE NOT IN?







If you liked NEO's serialisation of *ArchLord*, don't forget to check out the manga when it's on sale in April!

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NEO Reviews

INDEPENDENT, FAIR AND HONEST

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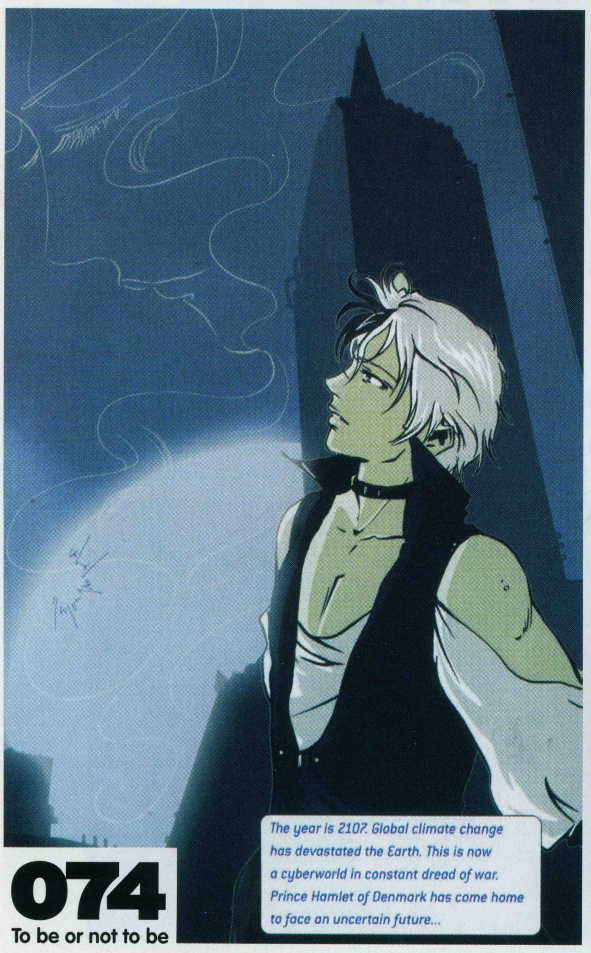

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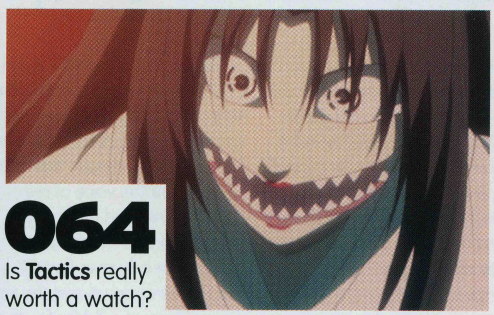
To be or not to be



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SCORES

Excellent ★★★★★
An essential purchase that you shouldn't do without – simply outstanding

Very Good ★★★★
Top notch – has a few minor flaws but otherwise is great entertainment

Good ★★★
Above average, worth checking out if you're a fan of the genre

Poor ★★
Decidedly dodgy and probably only appealing to a minority

Awful ★
Eat your own vomit before picking this one up

AWARDS

Gold Award
Bestowed upon any film or anime with an excellent all round package – including both the overall and DVD extra scores. Also awarded to top scoring mangas and games.

Editor's Choice
Only one of these coveted awards is given out every month – whether it's an anime, game, film or manga, you know it's the cream of the crop!

Tactics Series One, Part One

AVAILABLE: Now
LABEL: Manga Entertainment
CERTIFICATE: 15
NO. OF DISCS: 3 Discs
RETAIL PRICE: £29.99
RUNNING TIME: 325mins
SERIES LENGTH: 2

Kantaro is a writer-cum-exorcist on the hunt for the legendary Onikui, a demon-eating long-nosed goblin. Together with Yoko, his indentured fox-spirit servant, the pair come across a family cursed by an ice demon, as well as a new friend, Suzu. Kantaro also finds his goblin, whom he names Haruka, and the group start taking on supernatural cases across Japan.

Tactics is a strange title for this compelling supernatural comedy. Set in the Meiji Era, a period of westernisation in Japan, it mixes classic elements of Japanese mythology with a slightly more modern setting complete with suits, cameras, trams and trains. Kantaro is a jack of all trades: a novelist, etymologist, expert in folklore, paranormal investigator and a part-time exorcist with a knack for befriending yokai (benevolent demons) and getting rid of oni, their nastier brethren.

Kantaro's cute sidekick is an unlikely one. Feisty Yoko acts more like a bossy big sister than an indentured servant, but she is actually a fox demon. By naming her, Kantaro became her master, but despite this relationship she remains the voice of reason, worrying about money and making sure he accepts commissions. While Yoko does spend much of her time in human form, if she gets mad her fox ears pop up and she retains the ability to transform at will. Her fox form isn't exactly realistic or particularly cute but it does come in handy during the course of the series.

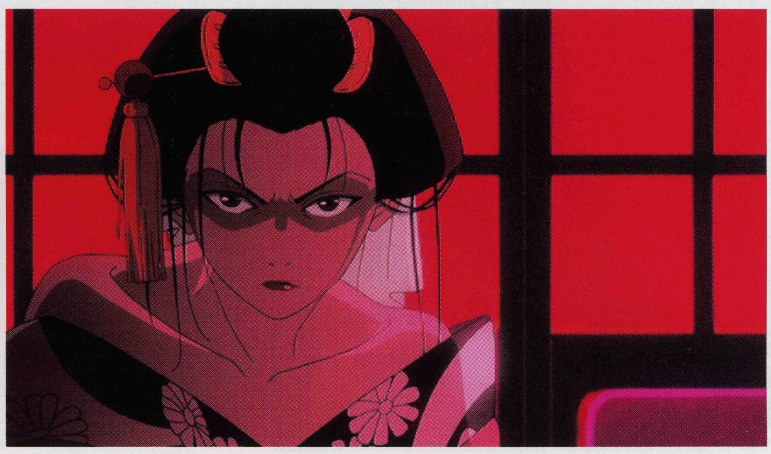
The most striking character designs are those for Haruka; he's a lot more interesting than Kantaro. *Tactics* could so easily have become a shonen-ai series and it's no surprise that the creators of the manga did their own yaoi scenario starring just such a relationship.

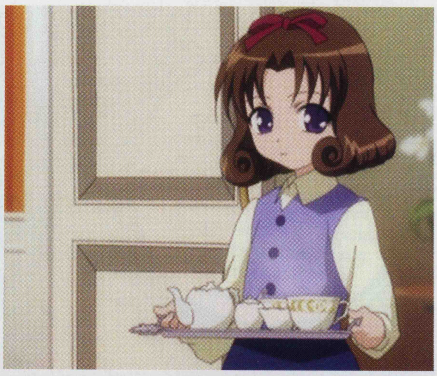
As well as Haruka, there are a number of minor supernatural characters, in particular Lord Sugino and his 'wife', the green blob known as Muu-chan who exists solely to provide some much needed comic relief. Muu-chan pops up in most episodes, just to trigger a smile from the audience, and Sugino normally follows close behind, but doesn't provide much support as a character after his debut episode.

Tactics really focuses on the culture clash between ancient Japan and its attempt to embrace a modern world where its demons no longer belong. While many of the demons

MANGA

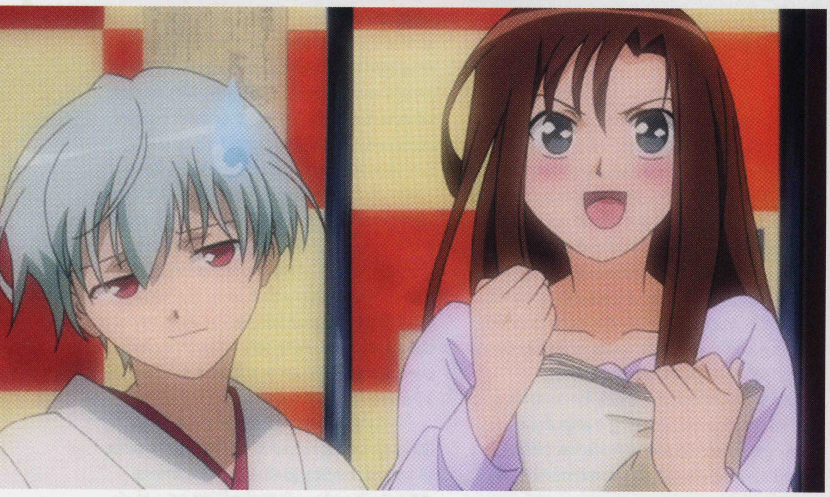
Originally a manga, *Tactics* is a collaboration between Sakura Kinoshira (who created Kantaro) and Kazuko Higashiyama (who came up with Haruka). The pair both make doujinshi (fan comics) and this has included a yaoi scenario featuring Kantaro and Haruka.





JAPANESE MYTH 101

At the heart of *Tactics* is the focus on Japanese legend and myth, its demons and denizens. Yoko is a kitsune, a fox spirit, while Haruka is a type of goblin associated with crows, hence his black wings, and there's even a shapeshifting tanuki. The oni featured in the series include elemental spirits and a vengeful dragon god. We not quite sure what Sugino's beloved Muu-chan is though – suggestions on a postcard, please.



ONIKUI
The first appearance of the demon-eating goblin Onikui (aka Haruka) is a stunning sight.

and ghosts rely on uniquely Japanese methods to manifest, such as dolls or the spooky children's game, kagome kagome, some also use modern technology including a camera that sucks out a soul and a ghost who uses a train to try and find his daughter.

Unlike in many series, there isn't always a happy ending to *Tactics*, but this makes a welcome change and adds a sense of depth. There's true love and there's true sorrow, caused by deaths which are much more moving and emotive than the ones inflicted by rampaging demons with a taste for blood. The storyline itself progresses very slowly and it is only in the final episode of disc three that the villains are revealed, even if their intentions are not. This does mean that the second part of the series is even more of a must-see than the first.

The animation is high quality, although there are moments when static scenes replace fully animated vistas of the Japanese landscape. The blend of classic buildings in Tokyo and women in kimonos, along with hints of the modern day, like trains, trams and people wearing western clothing, gives the whole thing a much more modern feel than similar series, such as the currently unreleased *Shonen Omyoji*.

The subtitles are well translated, however there are some inconsistencies. On the first disc, for example, the subtitles refer to Kantaro as sensei but later switch to "Professor". This disc also has a literal translation of his demon-banishing chant, but later drops this entirely in favour of a short descriptive note in brackets. The mountain god, Sugino, also refers to Haruka by his older name Onikui which is, at first, treated as an actual name but is then later translated as 'demon-eating goblin', showing that the translators just couldn't make up their minds. It's slightly irritating and comes off as a little slapdash, sadly tarnishing an otherwise brilliant series.

The three-disc set contains the first 13 episodes, which is more than enough to get you hooked on the series. The character designs are stunning and there's an impressive

DVD EXTRAS

There are some nice extras, though sadly none of them are stellar. This includes the standard textless opening and ending, interviews with the Japanese voice actors for Kantaro and Haruka, a photo gallery and a couple of commercials.

There are also some character biographies, and DVD adverts which are all static screens rather than actual advertisements. Most of the extras, bar the trailers and the biographies, have been taken directly from the Japanese release, which is a nice and welcome change. The episodes themselves are presented in widescreen with a choice of English and Japanese audio in 2.0 and 5.1 with subtitles.

collection of voice actors, both Japanese and English, who are very good at what they do. It's a great series that is well worth watching for all the right reasons, despite not being as high profile as some of 2007's other releases.
LESLEY SMITH

NEO VERDICT

An excellent supernatural series that is the perfect blend of serious situations and comic relief mixed with Japanese legend and a dash of modernity. Buy it!

FILM	DVD EXTRAS
★★★★★	★★

BLEACHIT

The original *Tokko* manga is by Tohru Fujisawa, the man responsible for *Great Teacher Onizuka*. *Tokko*'s target audience isn't quite so broad as *GTO*'s, although it is interesting to note that the leads in both stories seem to have a thing for bleaching their hair.

AVAILABLE: Now
LABEL: Manga
CERTIFICATE: 18
NO. OF DISCS: 1 Disc
RETAIL PRICE: £19.99
RUNNING TIME: 125mins
SERIES LENGTH: 3

Tokko Vol.1

By night, Shindou Ranmaru suffers blood-soaked nightmares. By day, he is a cop, fresh out of the academy, who is about have his nightmares cross into the daylight hours. Brutal killings, publicly blamed on drug trouble and gang feuds, mask a threat of a distinctly non-human sort. There is a lot that Ranmaru doesn't understand, including the role of Tokko, the sword-wielding outfit who seem to be the only ones capable of dealing with the real situation.

A quick glance at the opening credits shows that the manga *Tokko* is adapted from was serialized in *Afternoon*. This says quite a lot, as the magazine is aimed at an older readership and tends to be upfront with the often grimy, graphic nature of its content. To expect *Tokko* to contain moments of extreme, sudden violence would be to hedge your assumptions on a very safe bet.

In fact, *Tokko* takes but a matter of moments to display a willingness to assault its audience with hyperstylised slash and gore; its quick descent into a nightmarish opening scene being a quick-draw tactic that at once makes claim to a target audience, and grabs the attention of anyone viewing out of passive curiosity. The image is saturated in black, and a dull, pink-tinged metallic glaze seems to cover all but the ultraviolet glow of blood. Equal parts extreme and purposeful, it serves to leap headfirst into the story with the one, swift strike. And then it becomes apparent that lead character Ranmaru has been dreaming, and he wakes up, and the viewer is assaulted with vibrant colour, bras and incest jokes.

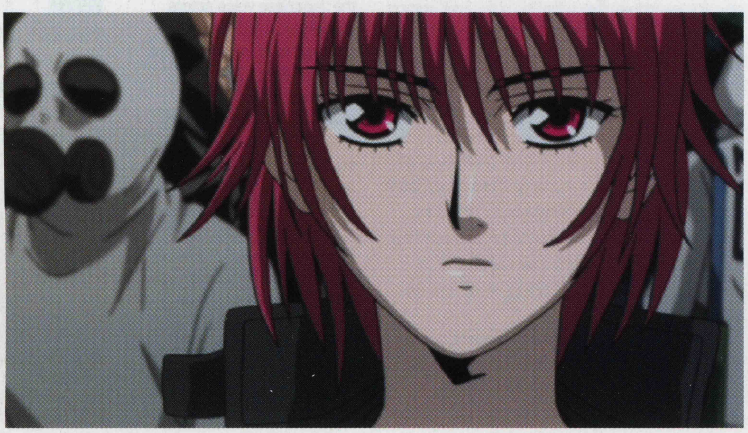
It's a staple of anime: a knack for controlling their very stylisation and using manipulative scripting to keep the mood fickle has often helped to make certain shows memorable. *Tokko* is a violent show, make no mistake, but it keeps a lot of its carnage hidden as an undertone – serious, and knowingly necessary to the plot, but never allowed to consume the whole. While it may lack the full to-and-fro content dexterity of shows such as *Martian Successor Nadesico*, *Tokko* still capably juggles its different kinds of atmospheres with sufficient success.

As the plot progresses, Ranmaru will quickly go from being a new police recruit to being entangled in a much bigger mystery: he finds himself and his team confronted with strange, parasite-like creatures which possess human hosts and can only be dispatched by blade, and soon afterwards learns of the mysterious Tokko unit. The pacing is steady, and although the immediate storytelling can at times seem a little jumpy, it's obvious that the series has a grounded sense of direction. The light comedy and character drama that serve as the show's initial snakeskin gradually peel away to reveal a darker, bloodier underbelly. Sometimes *Tokko* even manages to use one face as a means to achieving the other.

The animation in *Tokko* is fairly average, although strong colour and a consistent sense of stylisation helps to lift it up. Fight scenes still suffer, however; flashes of light on a black screen followed by scattered limbs leaking blood inevitably give the impression of budget restraint rather than freely chosen directorial decisions. Such restraints don't help the desired tension, either, which is unfortunate as the soundtrack does an admirable job, but at times sways dangerously close to being unintentionally humorous simply because the visuals aren't quite as intense as they should be.

There's massive potential here. *Tokko* isn't without its shortcomings, notably animation restraints and over-familiar character relationships, but it moves itself forward at a very confident pace, always purposeful, even when appearing to procrastinate. *Tokko* has definite overall vision, and we have great hope for the coming volumes.

TIM HENDERSON



DVD EXTRAS

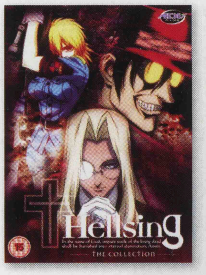
Yes, we appreciate having a 5.1 sound option for both language tracks, and the second *GITS* series does look very cool, but some sound options and trailers hardly qualify as extras. For many, they won't qualify at all.

NEO VERDICT

Although average at the moment, there's great potential here.

FILM	DVD EXTRAS
★★★	½

Hellsing The Collection



AVAILABLE: 16 April
LABEL: ADV
CERTIFICATE: 15
NO. OF DISCS: 4 Discs
RETAIL PRICE: £49.99
RUNNING TIME: 355mins

Anime has a strange obsession with vampires, and this release of *Hellsing* provides a perfect introduction to those who have not yet been formally introduced to Arucard and the Hellsing organisation: a church-backed group determined to rid the world of vampires and the aberrations known as Freaks.

Collecting all four volumes, *Hellsing* is a compelling series with main character and fledging vampire Seras' blond hair and (temporarily) blue eyes providing a stark contrast against the depressing visuals and character designs dominated by black and red. Added to that, the heavy emphasis on Christianity (something which is mysterious to many Japanese) gives *Hellsing* an odd vibe. Characters' praying after completed missions is fairly weird, whilst the music succeeds in giving it a creepy feel.

While the series is dark in tone, it is action packed and not in the least depressing. The English setting and twist on the *Dracula* myth is certainly novel and a lot more entertaining than the many other vampire series currently out there. If you haven't already come across the series then this is the perfect time.

LESLEY SMITH

NEO VERDICT
A creepy series which manages to hook you from the first episode.

FILM	DVD EXTRAS
★★★★	★★★★

DVD EXTRAS
The DVDs in the set are identical to the original releases with a nice selection of trailers for other ADV series. There's also the standard opening and closing credits and lots of concept art and that's just the first disc. There are also interviews, adverts from Japanese magazines, information on the action figures and a section looking at the various weapons used in the series. As well as this there's a choice of audio in Japanese and English 2.0 and the usual subtitles.

Speed Grapher Vol. 1

AVAILABLE: 2 April
LABEL: MVM
CERTIFICATE: TBC
NO. OF DISCS: 1 Disc
RETAIL PRICE: £19.99
RUNNING TIME: 100mins

Ten years after the global economy burst, the Tokyo of the near future sees the rich become richer at the expense of the poor. In a world where wealth can buy you anything, perverse pleasures can be satisfied if the colour of your money or your status fulfils the necessary anarchistic desires.

Whist investigating an exclusive and highly secretive club, ex-wartime photographer Saiga Tatsumi is awakened after a seductive encounter with a goddess. Evoking a dormant genetic trait, Saiga's livelihood becomes a weapon destined to save the goddess, Kagura Tennouzu, from the third of seven deadly sins – greed.

The first volume of this 24 episode, six volume series from animation studio GONZO, is an exercise in debauchery. Carnal desires catalysed by the boredom of the rich are envisaged by provocative, titillating scenes. While these scenes are used to reinforce the series' key plot points, their use blurs the underlying premise which has limitless appeal. Clearly scenes of this nature will appeal to an expansive audience and where other titles offering this level of titillation have failed to supply anything other than expansive visuals, *Speed Grapher* delivers a range of imaginative ideas that demonstrates the sterile nature of the many anime genres.

If *Speed Grapher* isn't remembered for its chilling, prophetic look on modern society, it's sure to be remembered for its ingenious use of photographic film and its respective equipment.

NIK WHITE

NEO VERDICT
Photography has never been this explosive.

FILM	DVD EXTRAS
★★★★	★★

DVD EXTRAS
Voice actor casting auditions and character profiles accompany the usual assortment of DVD extras.

ANIME ACTION

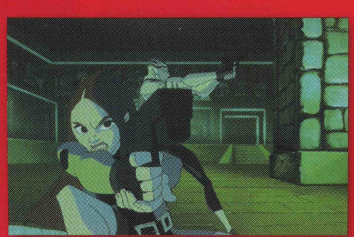
A look at the rest of the releases on offer

Last month saw Manga's release of *Hellboy*, an animated feature based on the comic book by Mike Mignola, published in the US by Dark Horse Comics. Although the creators of the film aren't Japanese, the story does touch on Japanese legends, as a cursed samurai sword sends Hellboy into a dimension populated by ghosts and monsters. Voiced by Ron Perlman of *Blade II* and *The Incredible Hulk* fame, Hellboy must escape the clutches of the thunder and lightning demons, whilst Liz Sherman (voiced by Selma Blair: *Legally Blonde* and *Cruel Intentions*) and Abe Sapien (voiced by Doug Jones: *Fantastic Four 2* and *Lady in the Water*) battle against a dragon. With over 600,000 *Hellboy* graphic novels sold across the world, Manga must be hoping to branch out into new territory with this release, although whether it'll catch the attention of any anime fans remains to be seen.

In April, Revelation will be releasing volume 12 of *Fullmetal Alchemist*, along with *Spiral* volume four and *Negima* volume two. The company also recently released a new series, *Rumbling Hearts*, although production problems prevented a copy from reaching the NEO offices in time for a review this issue. The series is based on a Japanese dating game of the same name, so we expect plenty of confusing relationship problems, and a host of girls who have nothing better to do than chase after a nerdy lead.

Revelation has another new series lined up for June: *Moon Phase*, which appears to star a cute vampire and a photographer who unwittingly sets her free from a mysterious castle. Promotional art for the show pictures the vampire wearing cat ears – we're pleased to see that Keitaro Arima, the creator of the original manga *Tsukuyomi: MoonPhase* was covering all his bases. (Although why she's not a robotic vampire with cat ears we don't know… unless we've just ruined a plot twist.)

Get ready for Revelation's release of the *Gunslinger Girls* boxset on 21 May – we've already covered the series extensively here in NEO, but if you've not yet watched the series then £29.99 seems a fair price for the boxset. On the same date, *Fullmetal Alchemist* comes to a close with volume 13. ›



InuYasha Season 1 Episodes 1-12

HOW LONG?
In the US in April, the 53rd *InuYasha* DVD will be released by Viz Media. That's a heck of a lot of episodes – 167 in total. The series ended in 2004 in Japan. Hopefully the UK release will be faster!

AVAILABLE: 16 April
LABEL: Fabulous Films
CERTIFICATE: 12
NO. OF DISCS: 2 Discs
RETAIL PRICE: £24.99
RUNNING TIME: 303mins

Kagome lives with her family in a shrine, and thinks her grandfather's hocus pocus is just a crock until she falls into the enchanted well and ends up in feudal Japan. There, she breaks the mystical Shikon jewel, and must team up with dog demon Inuyasha to retrieve it before the shards fall into the wrong hands.

InuYasha comes from a golden background – produced by Sunrise from an original manga by Rumiko Takahashi, the action adventure series has all the hallmarks of success. Antihero with a bad attitude and a heart of gold underneath it all? Check. Schoolgirl heroine with good looks, ditzy personality, an earnest desire to do what's best and a mountain of homework to do? Check. Host of lovable sidekicks with enough personality to divert attention away from the action for a few minutes with their antics? Check. Bad guy of the week plot set up with a never-ending quest to gather an infinite amount of items? Yep. In fact, so much about this series is clichéd and done to death that you'll have to stop to remind yourself that this is one of the archetypes of the anime genre, and it's not so much a rip off as an inspiration to the countless series which have come since. Okay, so it was first made in 2000, so it's hardly ancient, but Takahashi has been churning out manga volume after manga volume of this since 1996, and in Japan volume 48 was released in January. The brainy types amongst you might realise that with the manga series still going and the anime finished, there's no 'real' resolution to this series – but you know, this is only 12 episodes out of 167, so we don't think you need worry about that just yet.

So, what about the content of the episodes? By the time we finish this boxset, Kagome and Inuyasha are deeply involved in their quest to hunt out the shards of the Shikon jewel. This device serves to bring them into contact with countless different bad guys every few episodes, and each one of them turns into a more powerful foe under the influence of the jewel shard. At the moment, this remains interesting as the types of enemies the group has encountered are varied. However, with over a hundred episodes to go, we do wonder how long this formulaic approach can be sustained. Of course, being huge fans of the manga we know we can devour just about anything Takahashi serves up and still come back for seconds – if the anime can keep true to the manga then this should be a tasty treat.

Overall, the series is off to a great start, and if you've found yourself looking for something to fill the gap between one *Naruto* release and the next, you've probably found it. Just be warned, if you have any sense whatsoever you'll undoubtedly be irritated to the point of homicide by the American dub script for the actor who plays Kaede. Whilst we understand that she's an old woman and she lives in the past, we're not quite sure who decided that the best way to portray this was to replace every instance of the word 'you' and 'your' with 'ye'. It's not ye olde English, it's nonsense, and it does little but put ye teeth on edge. Luckily she's not in it much or we'd have to write a letter to someone.

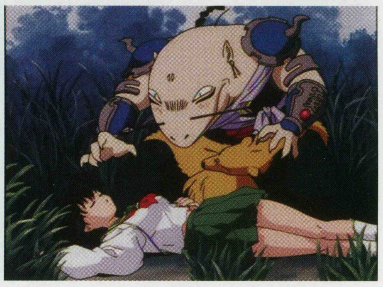
There's definitely a bit of Takahashi magic here, and if you're a fan of fantasy quest type series, you'll love this. It's well paced, varied enough to stay fresh despite the generic quest based plot, and the conflicting personalities of the characters keep it all pretty interesting. Solid stuff.

BRIDGET FOX

NEO VERDICT
Suffers in comparison with newer offerings like *Naruto*, but nevertheless is still a hugely entertaining show.

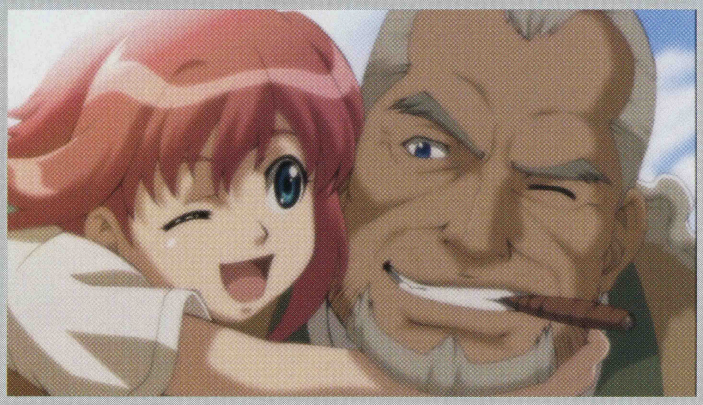
FILM	DVD EXTRAS
★★★★	★★

DVD EXTRAS
Woeful, but what else did we expect? Some effort has been made, because we have a cast list, line art, English and Japanese promos ("Inuyasha, half demon, half human – all action!"), textless openings and closings, but let's face it, no one really wants to see any of that anyway.



Vol 1: Fox Trot
Coyote Ragtime Show

AVAILABLE: 16 April
LABEL: ADV
CERTIFICATE: 12
NO. OF DISCS: 1 Disc
RETAIL PRICE: £19.99
RUNNING TIME: 100mins



Mister is a master (try saying that five times fast) criminal with so many aliases people have given up on anything but the name Mister. He's also a man with a mission: to avenge the death of his friend, the pirate king Bruce, by retrieving his daughter's inheritance from the planet Graceland before the government blows it up. Oh, and getting out of prison might be a good idea too.

As slick and confident as Mister himself, *Coyote Ragtime Show* is equal parts sci-fi and swashbuckler. Whilst the *Cowboy Bebop* comparisons are inevitable, this is a lighter-hearted show with the focus more on big adventure than personal drama. It works well too, with snappy dialogue, likable characters and some fantastic action scenes. The battle that takes up most of episode two, 'The Girl At The Pirate Hideout' is particularly good, moving from running shootout to dogfight without slowing down once.

The show's ambition matches Mister's own, especially in episode four, 'The Days Gone By'. The story of King Bruce's last job is as much fun to watch as it is for Bruce to carry out. 'The Days Gone By' is an idea-heavy sci-fi caper that will leave you with a grin as huge as King Bruce and Co's haul.

A great start to a great series, this is the most fun you'll see on disc this month.

ALASDAIR STUART

NEO VERDICT
More Jack Sparrow than Spike Spiegel.

FILM	DVD EXTRAS
★★★★	★

DVD EXTRAS
Disappointingly slim, just production art, clean credits and trailers.

AVAILABLE: Now
LABEL: Beez
CERTIFICATE: PG
NO. OF DISCS: 1 Disc
RETAIL PRICE: £19.99
RUNNING TIME: 125mins

The adventures of young Renton Thurston and the rest of the Gekkostate group continue in Beez's third disk of *Eureka Seven*.

Since Renton came aboard, the mysterious Eureka has been having headaches and losing her ability to pilot the sky-surfing Nirvash Type Zero. Despite her health being a primary concern, she and Renton fly into the heart of the anomalous Coralian that has appeared in the middle of nowhere. Inside, Renton faces a psychological nightmare dug up from his own memories, delving deep into his fears and motivations.

The most appealing element of *Eureka Seven* is the impressively realistic cast. The friendships and rivalries between them, and their motivations, secrets and histories make even the most minor characters interesting to the viewer. Renton's otherworldly psychoanalysis here has overtones of *Evangelion* but he's a far more rounded personality than Shinji could ever hope to be.

The plot progresses markedly on this disc. Renton's relationship with Eureka reaches something of a plateau as his own ability to pilot Nirvash grows, the mysterious Coralian entities are encountered, and Anemone comes face to face with Eureka and Renton.

With the show gearing into its second arc, *Eureka Seven* looks set to gather pace and become even more unmissable.

MATT KAMEN

NEO VERDICT
A volume of changes and progressions for the most exciting mecha show in years.

FILM	DVD EXTRAS
★★★★	★★★½

DVD EXTRAS
Interview feature with Renton's VA, Johnny Yong Bosch, audio commentary on episodes 13 and 15 and not much else.

» continued...

ANIME ACTION

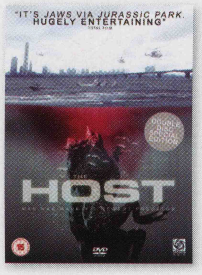
A look at the rest of the releases on offer

and Revelation have also suggested that the *FMA* movie, *Conqueror of Shamballa*, will be in cinemas somewhere in the second quarter of the year. More news on this when we have it.

Meanwhile, ADV's new series for May is *Le Chevalier D'Eon*, which we first flagged up in our NEO 2007 Preview in issue 028. We'll be covering the series in a feature next month, along with MVM's May release, *Elemental Gelade*. Boxset fans really should be prepared to put their savings plans on hold, as MVM has a boxset lined up every month. Last month we had *Chobits*, in April we're being treated to the *Tenchi* movies, and in May it's the turn of Ken Akamatsu's series *Love Hina*. Look out for NEO 032 for a feature on the manga creator and his works.

Manga Entertainment also has a new boxset lined up for April, and you should be able to pick up your copy of *Manga Essentials 2* very shortly. The three disc set contains *Legend of the Overfiend*, *Blood: The Last Vampire* and *Perfect Blue*. What can we say about *Overfiend* except that its reputation precedes it? Although the content might not be to everyone's taste, its place in anime history certainly does merit its inclusion in an 'essential' box. *Blood: The Last Vampire* is of course a NEO favourite, and the disc will contain a 'making of' feature which was included in its original DVD release. *Perfect Blue* is quite possibly Satoshi Kon's best work to date, and the disc will carry an interview with the director, voice actor interviews and behind the scenes performances, as well as some other extras. If you've never had the chance to sit down and watch *Perfect Blue*, take this opportunity – it's not only a Manga essential, it's an animated classic. The box is on sale from 2 April for £19.99.

The Host



AVAILABLE: Now
LABEL: Optimum Releasing
CERTIFICATE: 15
NO. OF DISCS: 2 Discs
RETAIL PRICE: £17.99
RUNNING TIME: 120mins

When a film opens with a scientist forcing his reluctant assistant to do something that flies in the face of all logic you know there will be consequences and – in the case of *The Host*, there most certainly are. Thus, as a result of a toxic chemical dump, a mutated creature is stalking the banks of the Han River, devouring and kidnapping people left, right and centre – and there's only one dysfunctional family brave (or daft) enough to stop it…

The first 20 minutes of Bong Joon-Ho's *The Host* pack in more action than most monster movies manage in their entire length. This leaves the rest of its runtime free to change tack slightly – *The Host* is, at heart, a family drama. The director cites M. Night Shyamalan's *Signs* for giving him the courage to make a monster movie that focuses on one small, ordinary family fighting against the odds. In reality, however, the family in *The Host* aren't fighting the monster so much as they are just trying to rescue their daughter / granddaughter / niece (and simultaneously battling their own inadequacies, along with all the authorities that Korea and America can muster).

The main characters are everyday people, not particularly strong or clever. Gang-du, the father of the kidnapped girl, is the very personification of "unlikely hero" – so unlikely, in fact, that he barely manages to do anything heroic at all. He exists in a semi-permanent half-asleep state, though that does fleetingly work to his advantage from time to time. Gang-du's siblings are equally inept – his brother is an unremarkable, unemployed university graduate and his sister is a bronze medallist in archery. However, we are told that she could have been a gold medallist – if it weren't for the fact that she is painfully slow at everything she does, always hesitating for those few moments too long.

The film is curiously devoid of mother figures; no one's wife bothers to make an appearance, or even merits much of a mention. Instead, there are just a lot of lost children. Everyone has at least one fatal flaw; and in spite of all accepted movie logic, their efforts are largely in vain (think *Night of the Living Dead* with a big carnivorous slug). Bullets have no effect, or run out at inopportune moments; even a last-chance Molotov cocktail can't get where it's going. Without spoiling too much, the obligatory happy ending doesn't pan out the way you'd expect it to either – oh no, there far too many deaths for that.

On top of all this, there is also a strong political undercurrent to the movie, and the isolation, constant danger and blatant allusions to real events evidently struck a chord with Koreans, because the film broke all box office records when it opened.

The American influence is almost always a bad one in *The Host*, with the gung-ho government serving itself instead of its people. Distrust of authority, and the sense that the

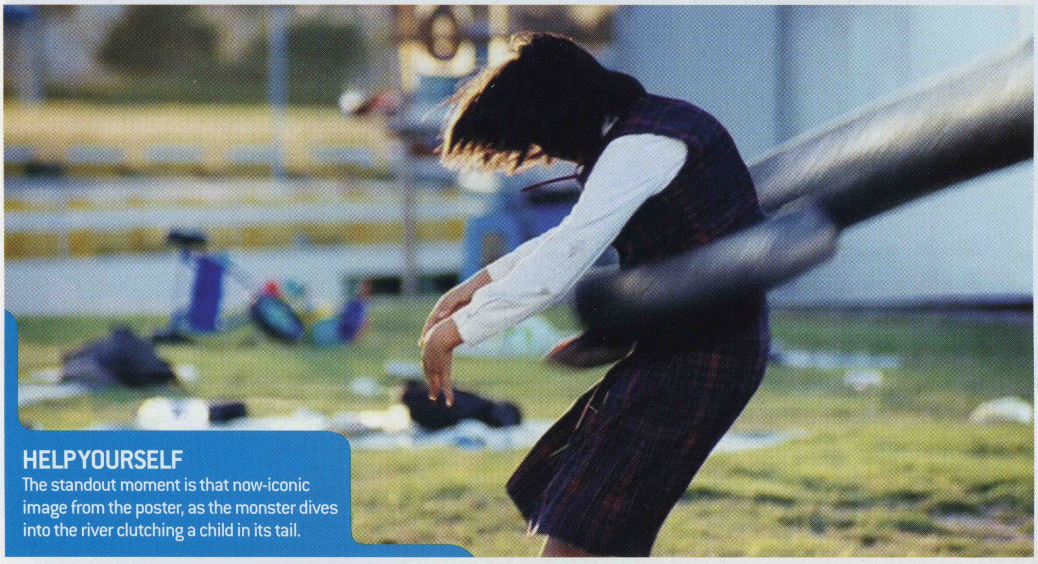
The Host, along with a new wave of instant classics, is proving Korea's film industry is currently on a roll.

SUCCESS

The Host is the most successful Korean film ever, breaking box office records to become South Korea's biggest selling film. It also premiered in Cannes last year.

COME IN, AGENT YELLOW

The toxic "Agent Yellow" used in the film's finale is a rather transparent allusion to Agent Orange, a weedkiller used by the American military during the Vietnam War. Its military application was to reduce the amount of jungle cover available to the US's enemies. As Agent Orange degraded in the soil, it released dioxins, which in turn led to cancer and mutations amongst those who came into contact with it. Class action lawsuits have been filed in both South Korea and Vietnam – heavy stuff for a monster movie.

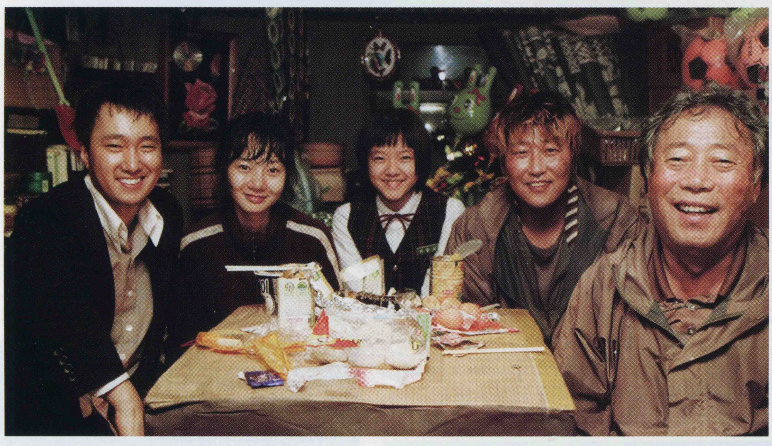


HELP YOURSELF

The standout moment is that now-iconic image from the poster, as the monster dives into the river clutching a child in its tail.

DVD EXTRAS

The first disc is pretty bare bones – but when there is a whole second disc packed with extra stuff then who cares? Everyone involved with the movie pops up to talk about any number of different things in a series of mini-documentaries. The highlights include a fun gag reel and 'Memories of the Sewer' expose. The former features different and unfinished animations of the monster; the latter covers trained rats, the awful smell, and the vaccinations the cast and crew had to have in preparation for encountering the various nasties lurking in the sewer. Ugh!



government isn't telling the general public everything (or, in some cases, anything) isn't something that's unique to Korea, though, which possibly begins to explain why *The Host* has managed to attain such global appeal.

But, without getting too serious, *The Host* has plenty of other things going on. It is darkly funny – with humour often offsetting some of the most upsetting moments – and it is also a stunningly good-looking movie. The monster itself is brilliantly rendered: seemingly composed entirely of teeth and a tail, it lopes along looking mutated, repulsive and completely wrong; but it is not so big that it's invincible (or that it can't hide in dark corners). There are several scenes where you may find yourself holding your breath, almost not wanting to look, but compelled to nevertheless, and the dank sewers in which the monster makes its lair really are deeply unpleasant.

There are a lot of different layers to *The Host*, far beyond its obvious selling point as a run-of-the-mill Godzilla-esque monster movie, and NEO is happy to report that the (literally) explosive finale is a spectacular payoff for a film that's sure to become a classic.

SARAH DOBBS

NEO VERDICT

At once cleverer and sillier than it seems, *The Host* deserves all the attention it has been getting.

FILM	DVD EXTRAS
★★★★	★★★★

It isn't easy being a character stuck in *Host*'s world, especially when you're far from a hero.

NEO EDITOR'S CHOICE

Welcome To Dongmakgol

DVD EXTRAS

Some accomplished extras accompany the movie's DVD debut, including a great 'making of' documentary that even features footage of the producers driving to the airport to pick up US actor Taschler (who looks unrecognisable without his character's beard and haircut). This accompanies a look at creating the film's atmospheric credits sequence, an overview of the cast and a series of trailers. Best of all, however, is the unexpected novelty of seeing how the poster design came to be – an innovative extra that we see all too little of these days.

AVAILABLE: Now
LABEL: Showbox Entertainment
CERTIFICATE: 15
NO. OF DISCS: 1 Disc
RETAIL PRICE: £16.99
RUNNING TIME: 133mins

In September 1950, during the Korean War, two sides of the same battle end up stumbling into the small village of Dongmakgol. Representing the interests of the "reds" is a brigade of three men, led by Chief Comrade Lee, whilst the republican side consists of a twosome directed by Lieutenant Pyo. Alongside a fallen American military man called Smith, the natural "enemies" point guns and grenades until a surprising bond is formed…

Welcome To Dongmakgol was Korea's official foreign language entry into the 2005 Academy Awards. That it was not selected is yet another damning indictment on the same industry that refused to honour *Citizen Kane*, *Seven Samurai* or Alfred Hitchcock – for this is a tear-jerking, thoughtful little masterpiece that does everything a great piece of cinema should. Although a little slow-going in its initial stages, the film soon warms itself to the viewer thanks to its message that war only happens because leaders want it to and, with the right dialogue, human beings can co-exist without violence. Not the most radical statement, of course, but in our current times it is certainly apt and, depicted with the right mix of realism and sincerity, *Welcome To Dongmakgol* proves to be a heartbreaking experience.

Pivotal to the movie's success is actress Kang Hye-jeong (most recently seen in *Lady Vengeance*), who gives a phenomenal performance as a simple girl who is unable to comprehend gunfire or war, having been exposed to neither. The village of the film's title exists as a socialist ideal, where everyone is equal and matters are never solved with brutality – indeed, the inhabitants of Dongmakgol have no notion that their country is in turmoil because they have cut themselves off from the outside world. When asked by one of the army men how he keeps his people from rising up against him, the village leader merely replies that he "feeds them" – again stressing the left-leaning politics of the picture. Both the Northerners and the Southerners soon put aside their antagonism for each other and fall in love with this strange little residence and, when they learn that military bombing is planned for the area, they work together to thwart the operation.

With gorgeous photography, and the perfect blend of CGI, green screen and model work, *Welcome to Dongmakgol* is a technical work of art – and one cannot fault the acting. Newcomer Steve Taschler, the only American lead in the movie, is especially impressive – transforming from a confused and injured army grunt into a mindful and warm-hearted member of the village who, finally, has no intention of leaving.

Considering that South Korea's indigenous cinema is still a growing industry, it is nothing less than incredible that the past two years alone have seen such marvels as *A Bittersweet Life*, *The Host* and *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*. You can now add *Welcome to Dongmakgol* to this list.

CALUM WADDELL

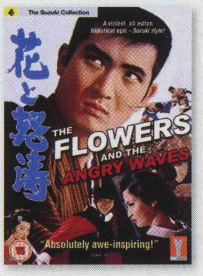
NEO VERDICT

Welcome to Dongmakgol is an instant classic – and if you happen to miss it then the loss is entirely yours.

FILM	DVD EXTRAS
★★★★★	★★★★

We could write all kinds of captions in here, but on reflection most of them are far too cruel.

The Flower And The Angry Waves



AVAILABLE: Now
LABEL: Yume
CERTIFICATE: 15
NO. OF DISCS: 1 Disc
RETAIL PRICE: £19.99
RUNNING TIME: 88mins

A hugely complicated set of events begins when lowly bandit Kikuji (an excellent performance by Akira Kobayashi) runs off with his boss's wife and goes "straight" as a labourer in a crooked company with a corrupt union. There follows a love triangle, fights, cops – and the cuckolded boss even sends an assassin after him (who dresses as if for the Paris opera).

This is a beautifully shot mix of samurai, western and gangster flick – all set in a vague "early 20th century". The whole film feels timeless because it spans so many genres that audiences associate with different time periods.

DAVID A MCINTEE

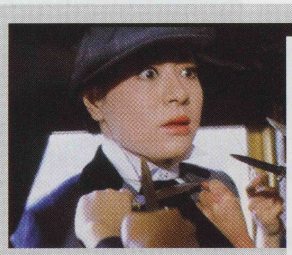
DVD EXTRAS

Trailer reel and an essay – but this is a very nice transfer considering the age of the film.

NEO VERDICT

Suzuki at his absolute best (and most influential) both mastering and subtly satirising several genres.

FILM	DVD EXTRAS
★★★★★	★



Sex and Fury

AVAILABLE: TBC
LABEL: Fabulous Films
CERTIFICATE: 18
NO. OF DISCS: 1 Disc
RETAIL PRICE: £15.99
RUNNING TIME: 88mins

By 1973 the once-booming Japanese film industry was in a sorry state. With audiences staying home to watch television, film producers tried to lure back their lost customers by offering them what they couldn't get on TV – graphic sex and violence. *Sex and Fury* is partly a yakuza action movie, but mainly it's a pinku-eiga, a porno film. Inoshika Ocho (Reiko Ike) is hunting for the three people who murdered her detective father when she was a child. She chances upon anarchist Shonosuke (Masatake Naruse), who by coincidence is trying to kill corrupt politician Inamura (Tatsu Endo), one of the people Ocho is looking for. Matters are complicated by Shonosuke's affair with Christina (Christina Lindberg), a British spy. Directed by Norifumi Suzuki, this is the worst kind of exploitation movie, filled with gratuitous sex scenes and endless violence directed at women. The plot borrows heavily from *Lady Snowblood*, but with the over-riding misogyny this is degrading, demeaning and ultimately depressing.

DAVID WEST

NEO VERDICT

An unpleasant experience from start to finish.

FILM	DVD EXTRAS
★	★★

Fighting Delinquents

AVAILABLE: Now
LABEL: Yume
CERTIFICATE: 15
NO. OF DISCS: 1 Disc
RETAIL PRICE: £19.99
RUNNING TIME: 80mins

Actor Koji Wada plays the son of a businessman who becomes something of a rebel as he matures – getting into rock 'n' roll and girls. Meanwhile, crooked types from a rival business empire try to take over the family's nine-to-five gig. *Fighting Delinquents* was released in 1960 and it shows. It is a movie about changing times from a time of change. Ostensibly about the hip-kids vs. old fogies divide, this is just as much about the difference between rural island life and city dwelling. Despite the vague overtones of 50s beach movies or Cliff Richard films it retains a solidly Japanese identity, with well-defined matriarchs of rival families and importance given to ritual and ancestry. Overall it's no classic, but worth a look.

DAVID A MCINTEE

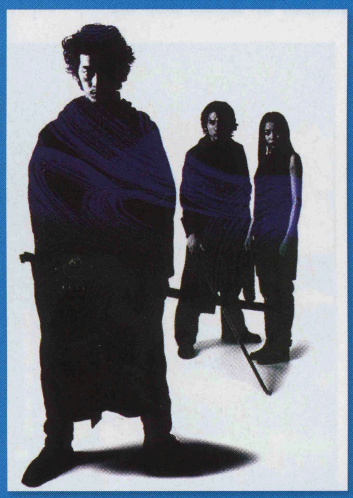
DVD EXTRAS

Trailers and notes – the transfer and sound are both adequate.

NEO VERDICT

Very much a product of its time, this has its moments and passes the time amiably.

FILM	DVD EXTRAS
★★★	★



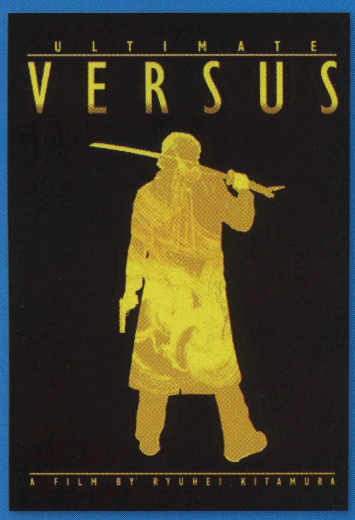
DVD DELIRIUM

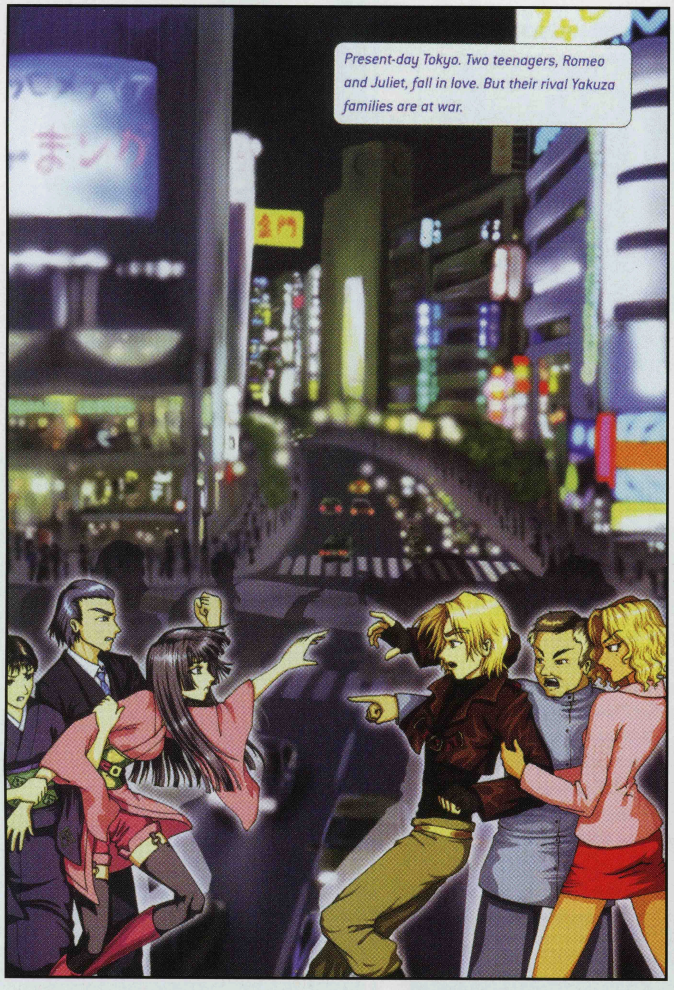
Calum Waddell's last word on a low budget martial arts favourite

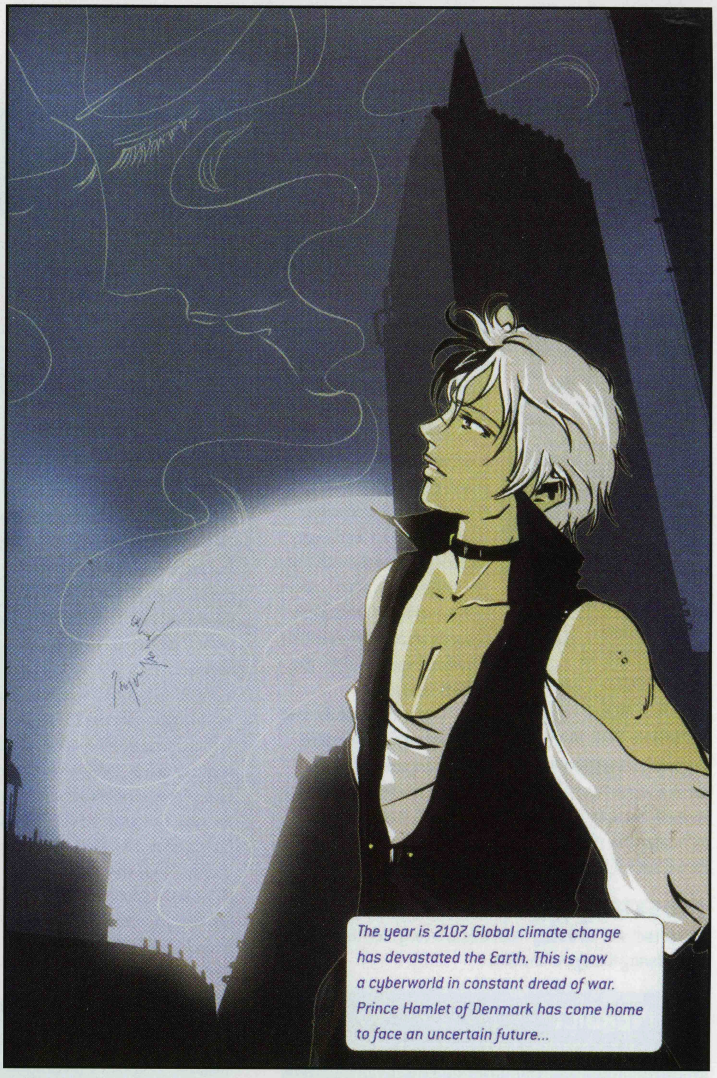
Last month NEO interviewed top Japanese director Ryuhei Kitamura about his debut hit *Versus* (2000) and, for this issue, we look to the Region 1 DVD release of the film from Media Blasters. Once again, those with a multi-region player are in for a treat because this three-disc stunner is jam-packed with extra features and contains an extended version of the feature film (although the irritating techno soundtrack is ever-present).

The film itself stars Tak Sakaguchi as a nameless prisoner who escapes with a friend and a female would-be hostage into some woodland after being freed by a gang of yakuza. As well as being chased by the same people who organised his release (as the yakuza double-cross him), Sakaguchi soon finds that he is in a forest full of zombies – and what results is 90 minutes of ultra-violence and a bizarre, futuristic coda. Although *Versus* is not a truly great movie, it is extremely well orchestrated on an extraordinarily tight budget and contains some fantastic fight sequences. It also moves along at a super-fast pace.

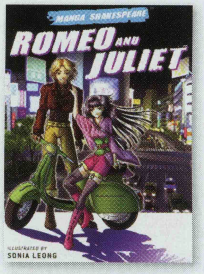
Extras in this latest release include two extensive behind-the-scenes 'making of' documentaries, a storyboard gallery, some footage of the film's original shoot in the woods, 18 deleted scenes (with a commentary from the director and star), lots of goodies from the movie's various film festival showings and separate editor and Sakaguchi chit-chats. Add to this the usual bunch of trailers and a mini-movie called *Nervous* (which adds some extra plot to the main feature) and you have a winner. Why can't all releases be put together so lovingly?

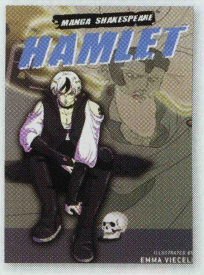






Romeo and Juliet & Hamlet





AVAILABLE: Now
LABEL: Self Made Hero
CERTIFICATE: N/A
RETAIL PRICE: £6.99 each
SERIES LENGTH: 1
AUTHOR: Sonia Leong/ Emma Vieceli

Two of Shakespeare's classics get given the manga treatment; in *Romeo and Juliet* the tale of forbidden love between two rival families is brought to life once more, this time in a modern setting of Tokyo; whilst the tale of *Hamlet*, a troubled prince, out to avenge those responsible for his father's death, is given a futuristic remake.

2D or not 2D, that is the question, but spectacularly poor puns aside, it is a chin strikingly worthy subject matter; should the works of one of the most famous and celebrated authors in mankind's history receive a manga-makeover? Well, if your answer to this is "no", we have to ask, "why not?" Baz Luhrmann did an amazing job of taking the classic tragic love story of *Romeo and Juliet* and immersing it in a modern world of drugs, guns and the kind of camera work a music video director would be proud of. The end result was an explosive retelling of a classic that made it cool and fresh for a new generation, whilst still keeping true to its roots. (*Sonic*, take note.) In a similar vein, Self Made Hero aims to do just that with the release of *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* in its newly established Manga Shakespeare range.

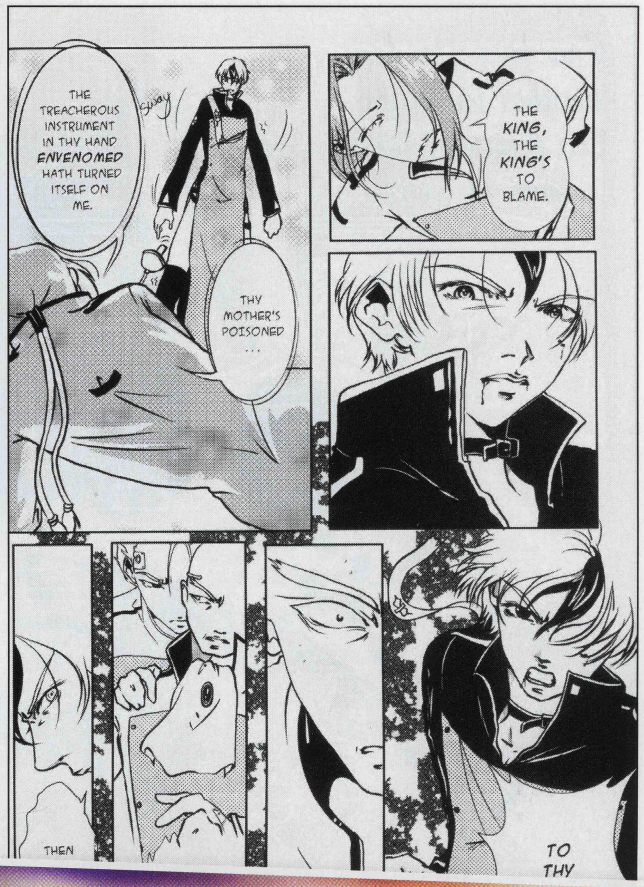
The premise is certainly an ambitious one. For example, who'd have thought the words "Hamlet" and "war-torn cyberworld" would ever appear in the same sentence? Yet SMH's *Hamlet* fuses the two and places Shakespeare's play of madness and revenge in the year 2107. Meanwhile, *Romeo and Juliet* unfolds in the streets of present-day Tokyo between rival Yakuza households.

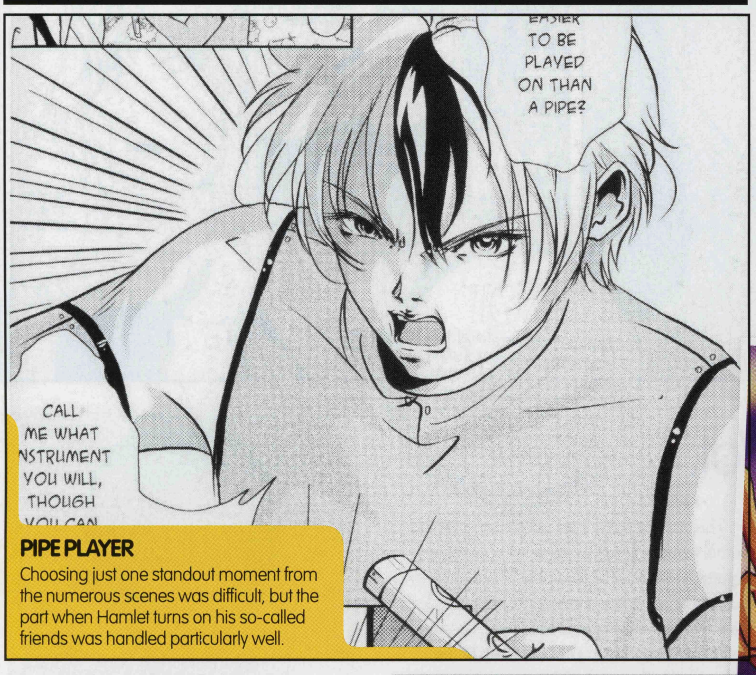
Romeo and Juliet's setting works particularly well, as the Japanese influences are seamlessly interwoven in a style that doesn't make the fact that it's a manga feel all that strange. This is also aided by the character design. The Capulets look very slick, similar to the Turks from *Final Fantasy VII* (Lord Capulet could easily pass as Tseng's stunt double); they're also always found donning clean-cut suits, shades, and of course, blades that have the habit of not staying concealed when Montagues are nearby.

The Montagues have a much more informal dress sense. Romeo's a rock idol in this adaptation, so looking smart and formal isn't on the agenda. Mercutio is portrayed much like he was in Buzz Lahrmann's version; he's hip, cocky and cool, wears unbuttoned shirts and low hanging trousers – he even has dreads. Benvolio dresses just as loudly, with bright colours, cyberpunk goggles and bracelets. Then there are the main characters of the story, *Romeo and Juliet*. Admittedly, judging from the cover alone, the two star-crossed lovers look a little too sickeningly sweet and dreamy, and ultimately forgettable. Fortunately, by the time we reached the inside back cover, our opinions had completely changed. Yes, we are aware of the well known proverb regarding judgement and covers, but the choice of imagery for the front of this manga sells the tale as another sappy inner-city teenage love story, while the choice of extracts on the back make the artwork look nothing more than someone's AS level coursework, which is a real shame, because the illustrations once you open the manga up are a real visual treat. We were especially impressed with the use of chibi – yes, you read correctly, characters do get super-deformed – to emphasis the comedic elements of the script; it helped break up the undertones of heartbreak and tension.

EXTRAS...

It's now the norm to find extras on DVDs, and regular manga readers would no doubt have noticed a similar trend of including extras such as adverts, extracts of other series, or background information on the author or story finding their way into manga. Well, in the Shakespeare Manga collection, Self Made Hero has included some neat little extras too. The first eight pages introduce the story as well as the characters, all of which appear in full glorious colour, while the back pages act as background information. A page gives a summary of the title's plot, another offers a brief history of William Shakespeare and his life, and the final page has information regarding the team that worked on the book; regular NEO readers might even recognise a name or two...





PIPE PLAYER

Choosing just one standout moment from the numerous scenes was difficult, but the part when Hamlet turns on his so-called friends was handled particularly well.

Further, the biggest achievement of SMH's *Romeo and Juliet* is indeed the way it flows. It's beautiful. Well, of course it is, it's the work of Shakespeare, but considering the amount of text left out, the bits included still manage to keep the same rhythm and poetical prowess as the original, making it both a joy to read, look at and study. Excellent work.

This moves us on to SMH's adaptation of *Hamlet*. From the cover, even if you haven't read *Hamlet*, you know this is going to be extremely dark and moody from the monochrome tones and the tense looking characters – and you won't be far wrong. The artist manages to capture every mood and emotion of *Hamlet*, from confusion, to determination, to sorrow, as the prince's "madness" develops ever stronger throughout the story.

Each and every character has a unique feel to them, with Hamlet looking especially striking. Although set in the future, the fashion of the period is a lovely mix of goth and 70s sci-fi. Hamlet's high collared waistcoat, his boots and bellowing white sleeves, plus his pure white hair with a black streak means he wouldn't look amiss in a *Dracula* story of old, yet here he is in 2107, with sockets in his neck and shoulder. This is the setting of *Hamlet*, and it certainly gives it a unique taste the tragedy.

Our only real gripe with *Hamlet* is that it feels like it's trying too hard to be manga. Where *Romeo and Juliet* feels modern naturally, *Hamlet* goes down the stereotypical cyberpunk avenue, yet doesn't utilise the setting with quite as much imagination as we had hoped, almost as if slapping it in the year 2107 is enough to shift copies to people who read manga. However, Self Made Hero has managed to hit each of its goals with these titles. They work wonderfully as study aids for those finding the written work a bit too dull or unappealing, and if you're a fan of Shakespeare's work, or manga's your life-blood, there's no real excuse not to pick up a copy. They're entertaining, different and brave. NEO doth salute thee, Self Made Hero.

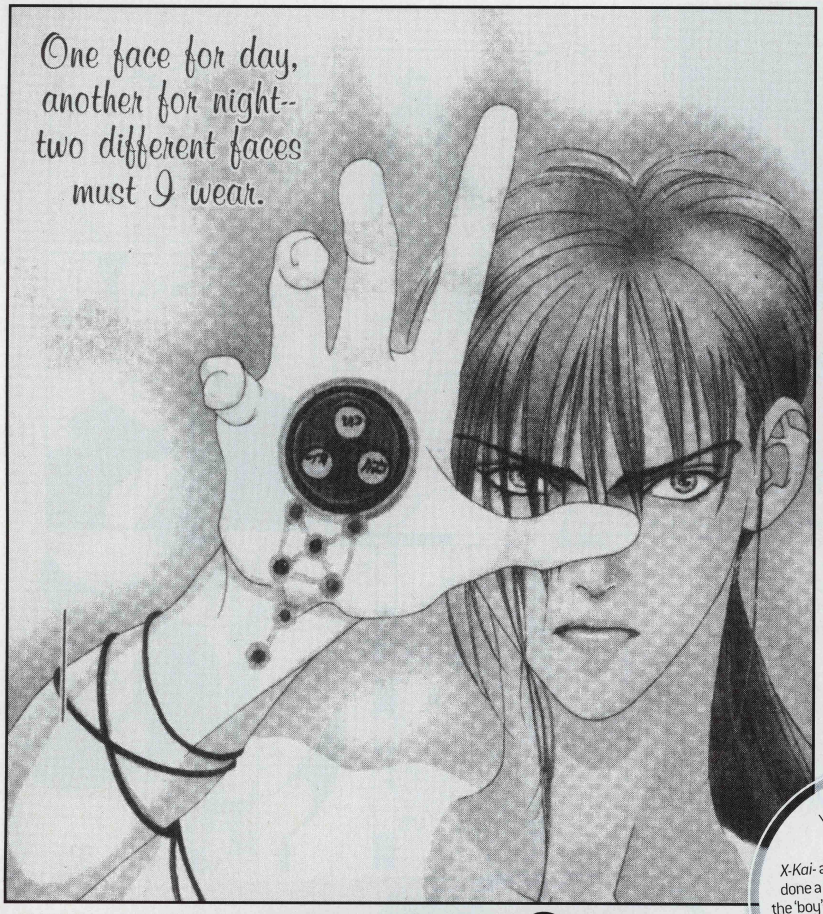
TOM SMITH

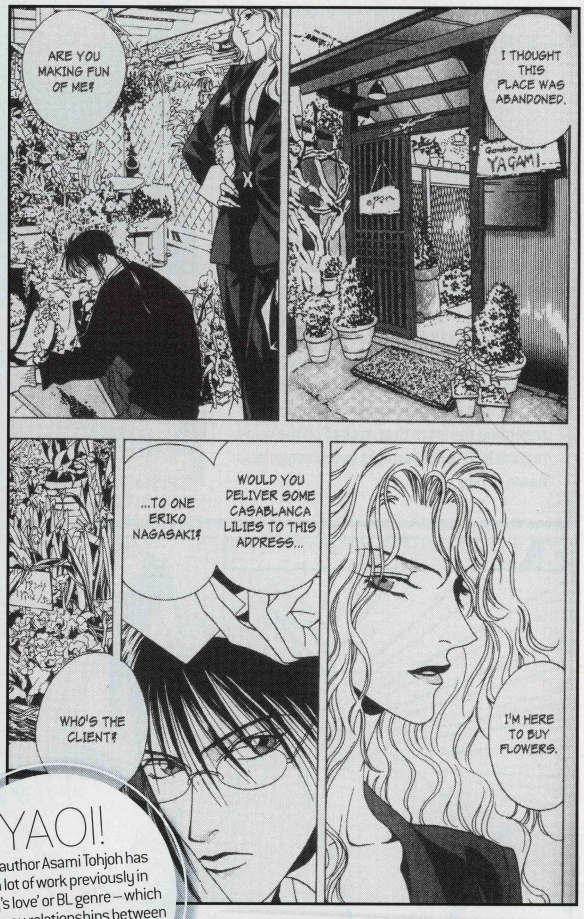
NEO VERDICT

These prove yet again that the works of Shakespeare are truly timeless, and that England can be taken seriously in the manga scene.

MANGA

★★★★





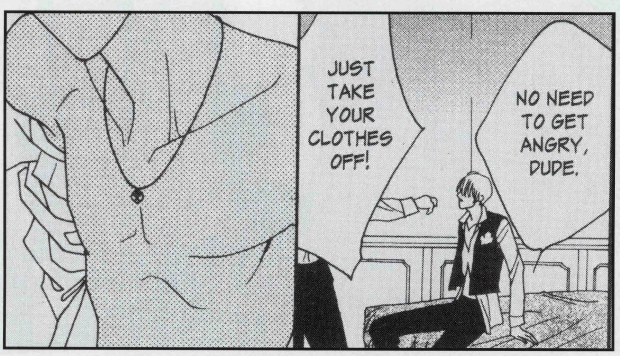
X-Kai- Vol. 1

AVAILABLE: 1 May
LABEL: TOKYOPOP
CERTIFICATE: 16+
RETAIL PRICE: £6.99
SERIES LENGTH: 2
AUTHOR: Asami Tohjoh

Kaito Yagami is the very epitome of an anti-hero. An assassin whose first love is flowers, he reluctantly takes jobs from his female handler, the mysterious Sugaru-san. His targets include a blind woman, a yakuza boss and a drug dealer. Despite being an assassin of great repute, his compassion tends to get in the way of his work.

X-Kai- from TOKYOPOP will immediately draw parallels with the cinematic masterpiece that is *Leon*, as it features the familiar premise of an assassin with an affinity for plants. Kaito's moral compass certainly seems to point the same way as that of Jean Reno's beloved 'cleaner' in his attitude to women and children, but unfortunately this is where the similarities end.

Fans of the traditional action-packed 'gun fights and chases' genre will be disappointed by the slightly more cerebral methods employed by Kaito to dispatch his prey. True to his botanical leanings, these methods tend to centre on the usage of natural poisons and, more commonly, sharp flower stems; basically any method that requires him to get up close and personal with his targets.



This volume is split into three parts that the author entitles 'Secrets'. The first two establish a pattern whereby Kaito is bought new jobs by Sugaro-san, and after a crisis of conscience, deals with the jobs in his own unique way. These two initial chapters take up just under half of the volume, with the meat of the story taken up with 'Secret 3', which represents a total change in gear. The plot moves on to Kaito dealing with a copycat killer who seems to be framing him for a number of murders by leaving behind the very same Casablanca lilies as he does at the scenes of his crimes.

Asami Tohjoh's art style may be off putting to some, but the tall gaunt proportions only seem to manifest themselves on Kaito, whilst the supporting cast, women in particular, all seem to have avoided the torture rack. Kaito's giraffe-like stature means that he looks decidedly effeminate, and if you are a fan of the bishonen style, then Kaito will undoubtedly please you.

His androgyny plays a major role in the story, a role that may be the factor that decides whether *X-Kai-* is for you. There are at least two very short scenes that bristle over with borderline homoeroticism, one in which Kaito pretends to be a male prostitute, and another involving a bath with the young orphan boy he befriends. In each case there is only the suggestion of something lurid beneath the surface, which thankfully ends as soon as it begins.

Kaito's history is only touched on briefly when we learn a little about the family circumstances that lead to his reliance on assassination as his main source of income. Beyond this we never really learn enough about Kaito's past to constitute any sort of substantial character development. Whilst normally this could be justified by the promise of a large series, by all accounts volume two looks as though it may be the conclusion, which means that unless Tohjoh squeezes a lot of back story into the next volume, many questions could go unanswered.

This alone shouldn't put you off, as on the flip side, the short series length means less investment to make if the story doesn't satisfy. Also there is a lot of enjoyment to still be had from the stories and motivations of Kaito's clients and hapless victims, which almost make up for the deficiencies in that of Kaito himself.

CHRISTOPHER BARKER

YAOI!

X-Kai- author Asami Tohjoh has done a lot of work previously in the 'boy's love' or BL genre – which involves gay relationships between guys. Check out his site (in Japanese language only) at http://tojo-asami.com.

NEO VERDICT

Definitely worth a purchase as long as you don't mind a sprinkling of serious 'pretty boy' flavour.

MANGA
★★★

Gunsmith Cats Revised Edition Vol. 1

Gunsmith Cats fans rejoice – the omnibus edition of the original manga series is here. In fact, make that 'manga fans rejoice', because if you're not a *Gunsmith Cats* fan we suspect it's just because you haven't read it yet. Well, here's your chance.

The story is set in Chicago, Illinois, and follows its two leading ladies, Rally Vincent and Minnie May Hopkins, as they try to scrape a living out of entertaining the manga reading public with their bounty hunting exploits. The series is a deliciously Japanese take on an American crime thriller, and even though the novel's look is now somewhat dated, the retro style is still hugely appealing. As is true to the genre, it features plenty of thrills and spills as Rally and Minnie May find themselves in car chases, running from exploding bombs or being hunted down by a psychotic criminal who lost her feet to one of Minnie May's hand grenades. There's also a fair bit of risqué fanservice – far beyond the usual cheesecake shots – as Minnie May gets road tested at a high class brothel and Rally finds herself trouser- and pant-less during a shootout.

One of the most distinctive things about the series is author Sonoda's obsession with guns. Rally works as a gunsmith and so comes into contact with a fair few firearms, and they're all depicted with loving detail. In fact, the storyline occasionally revolves around some technical aspect of the various pieces of weaponry, so you'll feel like an expert by the time you're through.

BRIDGET FOX

AVAILABLE: Now
LABEL: Dark Horse
CERTIFICATE: 18
RETAIL PRICE: £8.79
ARTIST: Kenichi Sonoda
SERIES LENGTH: 1+

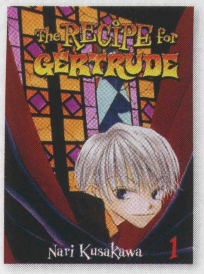
NEO VERDICT

An excellent retro feel series full of explosions, guns and gals. Definitely a fun title you shouldn't miss!

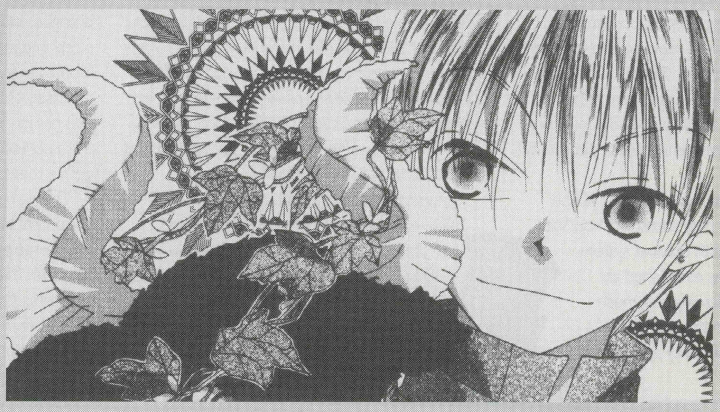
MANGA

★★★★★

Recipe for Gertrude Vol. 1



AVAILABLE: Now
LABEL: CMX
CERTIFICATE: Everyone
RETAIL PRICE: £5.59
ARTIST: Nari Kusakawa
SERIES LENGTH: 5+



Gertrude is a 100-year-old creature who looks like a young boy, and was made from a recipe using parts of various demons. If this wasn't bad enough, some of those demons want their bits back, and Gertrude is on a hunt to find his recipe, which has been lost through the passage of time. He hooks up with high school girl Sahara and a pair of raggedy looking demons who attempt to steal their ears back from him at the beginning of the story. Together they have to fight off those who want their body parts back, and search out the origins of Gertrude's lost recipe.

It's hard to know what to say about a story like this – whether it's a translation issue or simply the original author's text, there's something about the series that makes it very hard to follow. It doesn't help that speech bubbles float in the air without anyone claiming ownership over them, or that both lead characters look pretty much the same, except Sahara has dark hair and Gertrude is blond. Except, of course, for when it's a full moon, in which case they *both* have dark hair.

Although the premise for this manga was promising, it's a shame to see it being destroyed by the confusing artwork. Nari Kusakawa has an interesting angular style but needs so much more practice on pacing, panel layout and consistency that there's little to like about this offering

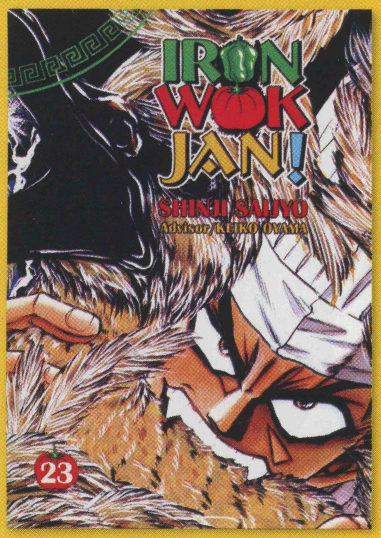
GEMMA COX

NEO VERDICT

Despite the interesting premise, this feels like a missed opportunity.

MANGA

★★



MANGA MUSINGS

Our round up of the manga market

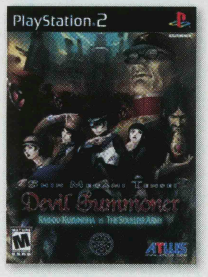
April sees the release of TOKYOPOP's new manwha series *ArchLord*. If you've missed our serialisations up to this point (shame on you), turn to page 052 for another taster of the series, which is based on the fantasy MMORPG of the same name. On the same page, we also have a quick mini-feature on manwha titles here in the west.

Apart from *ArchLord*, TOKYOPOP is also releasing *Magic x Miracle*, *TRASH* (both reviewed in NEO last issue), *My Dead Girlfriend* and *Otogi Zoshi* as its new series for April. There's definitely something there for everyone with the lineup, as we've got fantasy, comedy, romance and historical drama all firmly covered by these titles.

Meanwhile, Dr Master sent us through volume 23 of *Iron Wok Jan*, (obviously knowing our weakness for extreme culinary feats and cooking battles), and *Chinese Hero*, a manhua by Wing Shing Ma. In *Iron Wok Jan*, all three finalists for the cooking competition get lumbered with a futuristic ingredient – ostrich – which proves to be hugely difficult to work with. In *Chinese Hero*, a severe shortage of cool names is apparent, as in the plot summary pages we are introduced to the hero of the piece… Hero… and his wrathful arch nemesis, Master Man. What is wrong with the good old fashioned traditional name of Mister Man we don't know – perhaps Master Man is just one step higher. The hilarity of the names is just the beginning of a fairly poor comic, though, as we are forced to wade through pages and pages of character summaries before we can even start the story. *Chinese Hero* is printed in colour on glossy paper… and that's about all we can say to compliment it.

Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Summoner

Raidou Kuzunoha Vs The Soulless Army



AVAILABLE: 27 April
LABEL: PS2
CERTIFICATE: 16+
RETAIL PRICE: £34.99
PUBLISHER: Koei
DEVELOPER: Atlus

Raidou Kuzunoha is a private detective in Japan's Taishou Period of the 1910s and 1920s, but he's much more than just a well-dressed crime scene investigator; he also has the power to capture and conjure demons to do his bidding. Players take control of Raidou and his otherworldly companions, to guide them through thrilling episodes of action and intrigue, and learn the incredible secrets of the Soulless Army.

Developed in Japan, Atlus's intense action RPG *Devil Summoner* puts a fresh spin on *Shin Megami Tensei's* in-depth combat system. The *SMT* franchise has established an intensely devoted following and much like previous games in the series, this instalment focuses gameplay around demon summoning.

Using photorealistic graphics that transport you into 1920s Japan, the game kicks off with a mysterious young teenager being coached through demon-summoning techniques at a remote shrine. After he completes a set of basic tests he is allowed to take the name of his summoner ancestors: Raidou Kuzunoha.

Raidou combines his duty of watching over the demon and human citizens of Japan's capital city with a job at a detective agency. Business is slow, but then a young customer by the name of Kaya Daidouji asks the detective to meet her – and the adventure unrolls from here.

As soon as you start the game, you'll be patrolling the streets of the capital for clues, and since something's stirring up the demon activity, demons are absolutely everywhere. The random-encounter rate in *Devil Summoner* is almost absurdly high, and you'll be fighting everywhere you go, except inside shops. Almost every demon you run into can be captured, and once you've caught one, you can both summon it in battle and have it follow you around town.

Summoning a demon in battle means it will fight with you, and demons have a range of abilities they can use to help, such as powerful melee attacks, as well as healing and damage spells. Your demonic 'friends' are also important outside of the battlefield and each demon belongs to an 'order'. For example, a pagan-order demon has the ability to read minds, while a frost-order demon has the 'chill out' command, which can be used to freeze a body of water. You'll need these abilities to progress, and when you need a particular type of demon; Raidou's companion black cat Gouto will usually pipe up and tell you. If you don't happen to have a demon of that certain type, you'll have to go out and recruit one.

If you don't want to go hunt a specific demon type out, you can always create your own through fusion, which means taking two demons and combining them to create a third. Recruiting and fusing demons to create powerful allies is a major part of the game, and you won't be short of demons to use as fodder.

The different areas of the capital and elsewhere that you visit have nicely detailed backgrounds and buildings to give each area its own flavour. There's no voice acting to be found, but the story works fine through text dialogue, and the music serves to set the mood nicely in darker areas, though tunes in the town loop over and over... and over, and eventually can really grate on the nerves. Each demon type also has its own special noises that it makes, and the assorted chirps and growls further help to define them.

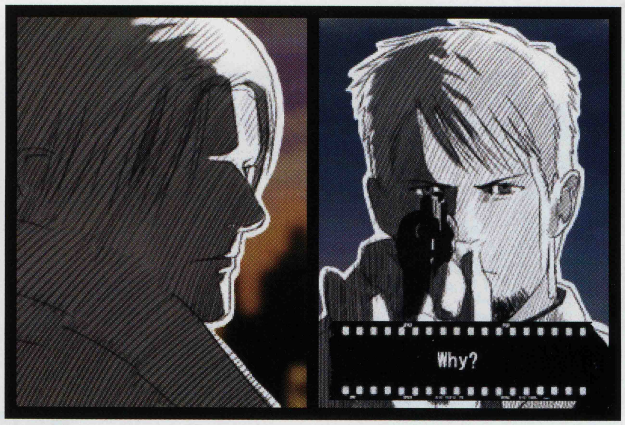
The game fills out more than 30 hours of content with the main narrative, including innumerable demons to recruit and hidden items to gather. Matters unfold over a dozen story chapters, although some chapters are much shorter than others, and all are punctuated by a lot of random fighting. Once you finish, you can start a new game file that gives you access to costumes and some other features and items not found in your first run through.

Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Summoner – Raidou Kuzunoha vs. the Soulless Army definitely delivers on the unique storyline front, serving up a dark narrative filled with a variety of personable and powerful demons to recruit, control, and fuse together. Although the newest instalment to the series suffers from repetitive battles and slow-rolling narrative, its fascinating premise makes it worth a look. Followers of *Shin Megami Tensei* and other role-playing fans will enjoy the ride, even if it's not as polished as previous games in the series.

CLARISSA DAY

NEO VERDICT
We're enjoying this different take on RPG, but not all the random battles it involves.

RATING
★★★



Hotel Dusk

AVAILABLE: 13 April
CONSOLE: Nintendo DS
CERTIFICATE: TBC
RETAIL PRICE: £29.99
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Cing

Hotel Dusk is the second DS title from *Another Code* developer Cing. The game follows the story of Kyle Hyde, an ex-cop turned salesman who quit the force three years previously following the betrayal of a fellow officer. Sent to the titular hotel on business on a cold December evening in 1979, Hyde discovers that his former colleague's dodgy dealings are somehow linked to the intertwining mysteries surrounding the hotel's secretive guests.

Despite first appearances, *Hotel Dusk* bears almost no resemblance to the point-and-click adventure genre that many gamers are hoping will be reborn on the DS. Although you do go around the hotel picking up objects and solving clues, the game is predominantly conversation-led, with surprisingly little in the way of puzzle solving or exploration. This may disappoint some, but fortunately the superb dialogue and well-developed characters are more than enough to keep you interested, even if you do feel like the game is almost always pointing you in the right direction. Not only that, but the unique in-game character art, which looks like rough pencil sketches that have come to life, is extremely pleasing to the eye, and really adds to the title's film noir feel.

MICHAEL DODSON

NEO VERDICT
The DS' first interactive novel certainly has a great story, but just doesn't feel 'interactive' enough at times.

RATING
★★★

Samurai Warriors 2 Empires

AVAILABLE: Now
CONSOLE: PS2, Xbox 360
CERTIFICATE: 12+
RETAIL PRICE: £29.99
PUBLISHER: Koei
DEVELOPER: Omega Force

The much-anticipated follow-up to the tactical action game *Samurai Warriors 2*, *Samurai Warriors 2 Empires* combines aspects of action, fighting and strategy games. Set in a feudal Japan divided into warring states, it's up to the player to resurrect a nation using equal amounts of strategy and strength.

Samurai Warriors 2 Empires is actually the first in Koei's successful line of *Empires* games to be set in Japan, where the ultimate goal is to unite Japan's 25 warring regions into a single nation under one ruler. It balances the political and tactical machinations of preparing an army for battle with the battlefield action that the *Warriors* games are already renowned for to provide an incredibly involving gaming experience.

Using the unique strategic play of the *Empires* series, the game's deck of 90 policy cards, used to issue military commands and impose political policies, is boosted by 50 new cards inspired by Japanese culture, and all-new formation cards are based on historically-authentic samurai attack formations.

With a stylised recreation of Japan's Sengoku era, *Samurai Warriors 2 Empires* is sure to captivate anyone fascinated by samurai culture. With the ability to create your own warrior and play 2-player co-op split screen, this might just make people want to return for more.

CLARISSA DAY

NEO VERDICT
It might have just done enough to make it stand out in the series.

RATING
★★★★

GAMING GOODNESS FROM JAPAN

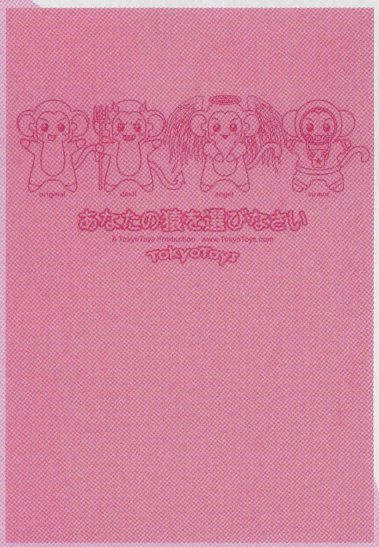
Clarissa Day looks at the Japanese game import industry

Is it just us or is importing video games from Japan becoming more and more popular? After all, it is arguably the home to the world's greatest and most unique games, and we all seem to want to get our hands on them. But it's not just us in the UK buying into the import gaming business; the Americans are completely fascinated by what the Japanese are coming up with too. And the gaming import industry is not just a niche market, as there is something for everyone.

If you just sit back and think about what Japan has brought to the video game industry, it's astonishing. We could probably spend all day listing their amazing achievements, but just to name a few obvious ones we have: Nintendo, Japan's oldest and largest video game producer who brought us the king of gaming, Mario; the huge franchise phenomena that is *Pokémon*, and Sega, who brought another gaming god into the world, Sonic. The pinnacle of the RPG genre, *Final Fantasy*, was also created by our eastern friends. All this is not surprising as the Japanese are animation geniuses, and, quite clearly, the animation business and video game development go hand in hand.

A few reasons why the importing is bigger than ever are as follows: a relaxation on region locking in recent years has meant we can broaden our minds by playing games only available across the waters; the increased popularity of internet shopping means that our access to buying imported games is immensely easier than it has ever been before; and the scene as a whole becoming less shady, at least in outward appearance.

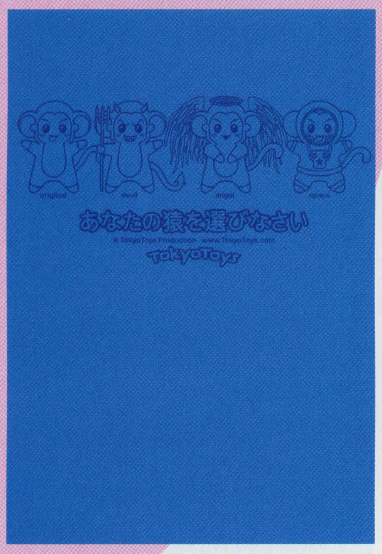
Also, all this means that when we see an amazing game coming out in Japan we no longer necessarily have to wait for it to hit our western shores. Just a few clicks of your mouse and you have gaming goodness delivered to your door all the way from the Far East.



Cosplay Coco tee

Now – £13.99 – www.genkigear.com

One for the ladies – another TokyoToys and Genki Gear collab, this time featuring Coco's skills as a cosplayer as he tries out devil, angel and astronaut costumes. Available in both Hawaii blue and baby pink, these two tees are gorgeous and show off Coco's versatility as a mascot.



Hellsing messenger bag

Now – £33.95 – www.TokyoToys.com

This *Hellsing* messenger bag is such a popular item on TokyoToys' website that when we were browsing through, it had sold out. The artwork on the bag is based on OVA poster art, and this officially licensed bag is fairly rare in the UK. Check out our review of the series on page 067.

Bleach Wallscroll

Now – £16.95 – www.TokyoToys.com

Bleach is a hugely popular anime and manga series that so far has yet to have a UK release (although we've heard rumours about one distributor eyeing up the rights). But that shouldn't stop you from picking up *Bleach* goodies to tide yourself over! Check out this beautiful wallscroll – Hideki from TokyoToys promises us there's plenty more *Bleach* where that came from on the site.

Ghost in the Shell messenger bag

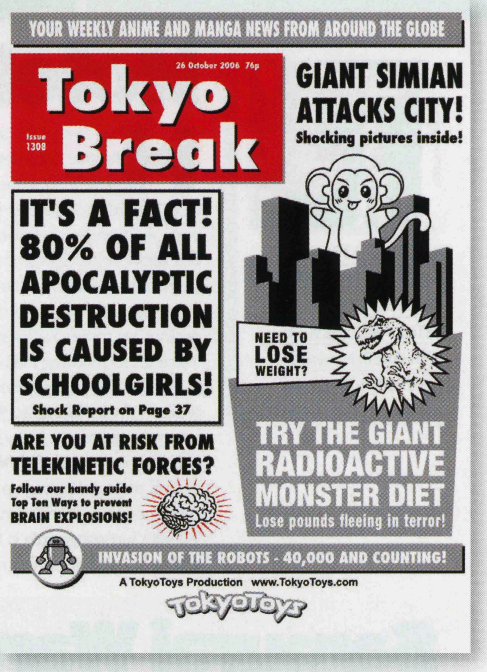
Now – £33.95 – www.TokyoToys.com

Messenger bags are large enough to carry all your essentials, and according to TokyoToys, you can even fit your laptop inside. Definitely ace if you're at school or university, these bags are versatile and hugely useful. We love the etched white design of this *GITS* bag – very mature, although beware if you own pets as the black fabric will show off their fur just as well as it shows off the Major!

Tokyo Break tee

Now – £13.99 – www.genkigear.com

In an exciting new collaboration between Genki Gear and TokyoToys, a new range of t-shirts have been designed, featuring TokyoToys' mascot, Coco. This unisex design is available in white only, and shows Coco as a radioactive monster stalking the streets of Tokyo and causing total chaos.



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A huge range of fabric patches that you can stitch onto your clothing is available at TokyoToys. Choose from patches from hot fan favourites like *Bleach*, Terratag's Laughing Man motif from *Ghost in the Shell*, *Fullmetal Alchemist* and the Mahora Academy logo from *Negima!*. We reckon they'd look cool on a plain black bag.

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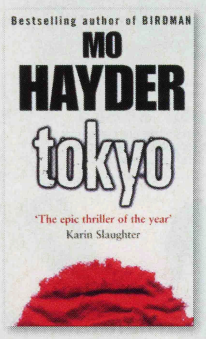


AVAILABLE: Now
LABEL: Bantam Books
RETAIL PRICE: £6.99
AUTHOR: Mo Hayder

This fantastic thriller follows the story of a young woman named Grey who comes to Tokyo with a mission in mind. Consumed by the Nanking Massacre of 1937, she is searching for a piece of evidence – a film – which is so horrific that some say it never existed. Grey is hell bent on proving to herself that her quest isn't insane, and a lot more is riding on her success than may first appear.

Grey finds herself working in a hostess bar, in between pestering an old academic who she believes knows the truth behind the Nanking film. However, in return for his help she must investigate a shady yakuza boss and his psychotic nurse – going undercover and putting herself in mortal danger.

Mo Hayder has made a name for herself with her brutal crime thrillers, and *Tokyo* is no exception. Full of perverse characters, alarming situations and graphic depictions of violence, the book tackles the real life events of the Nanking Massacre as well as a few more imaginative happenings. Hayder shines a light on one of the Japanese army's most shameful acts of the last century, and does so with extreme bravery. If you're at all sensitive or squeamish, it's best to leave this one alone.

Hayder develops her cast of characters with enormous depth and clarity. From the ghoulish nurse, the owner of the hostess bar who has a strange festish for Marilyn Munroe, to Grey's Russian flatmates, all of the characters are beautifully rounded and flamboyant. Even Tokyo becomes a character in its own right, and Grey's fascination with post war Japan means there are plenty of observations on the city which give it new light.

Even if you think you have absolutely no interest in novels with a historical background, you should give this one a go – it's hugely gripping and extraordinarily haunting.

JOHN TURNER

NEO VERDICT
Cold blooded thriller which tells the chilling story of Nanking.

RATING
★★★★★

Recipes of Japanese Cooking

AVAILABLE: Now
LABEL: Natsume
RETAIL PRICE: £15.99
AUTHOR: Yoko Fujita and NAVI INTERNATIONAL

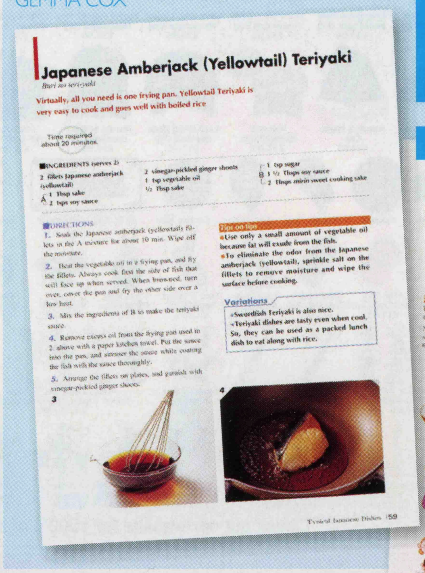
We've covered more than our fair share of Japanese cookbooks over the years here at NEO – from thin paperbacks like last month's *Bento Boxes* to beautiful hardbacks like Dorling Kindersley's *Sushi*. This, however, is a cooking book with a difference, as it's bilingual.

From the point of view of the average layperson, this will render 50% of the book completely useless, but if you're trying to learn Japanese then it suddenly becomes enormously useful. There's also the added bonus of knowing that the recipes are fairly authentic too – if they're being sold to Japanese readers then you have some peace of mind they're not doing the oriental equivalent of telling you to serve Yorkshire puds with fish and chips.

This book covers a lot more than the basic teriyaki chicken, sushi and yaki soba that we're all so used to in western cookbooks (although recipes for all of these are floating around in here somewhere). Some of the dishes might be difficult to prepare for the average UK cook, and the ingredients are sometimes not translated well (for example, a recipe for kidney beans with sesame dressing uses what looks remarkably like green beans – with no kidney beans in sight) but on the whole there's a good mix of the familiar and the exotic. Whilst we don't think we'll be making the surf clam adductor muscle and wakegi green onion with miso dressing dish on page 227,there are some interesting ideas we've never come across in Japanese recipe books before, like chicken breast with sesame vinegar, foil steamed salmon and simmered pumpkin.

With sections on equipment, ingredients, table manners and the benefits of miso paste, this is an interesting cookbook – but only for those with a passion for Japanese cooking. As well as this, there are only 64 pages in colour – the rest is black and white.

GEMMA COX



NEO VERDICT
Bilingual cookbook for real J-cuisine enthusiasts

RATING
★★★★

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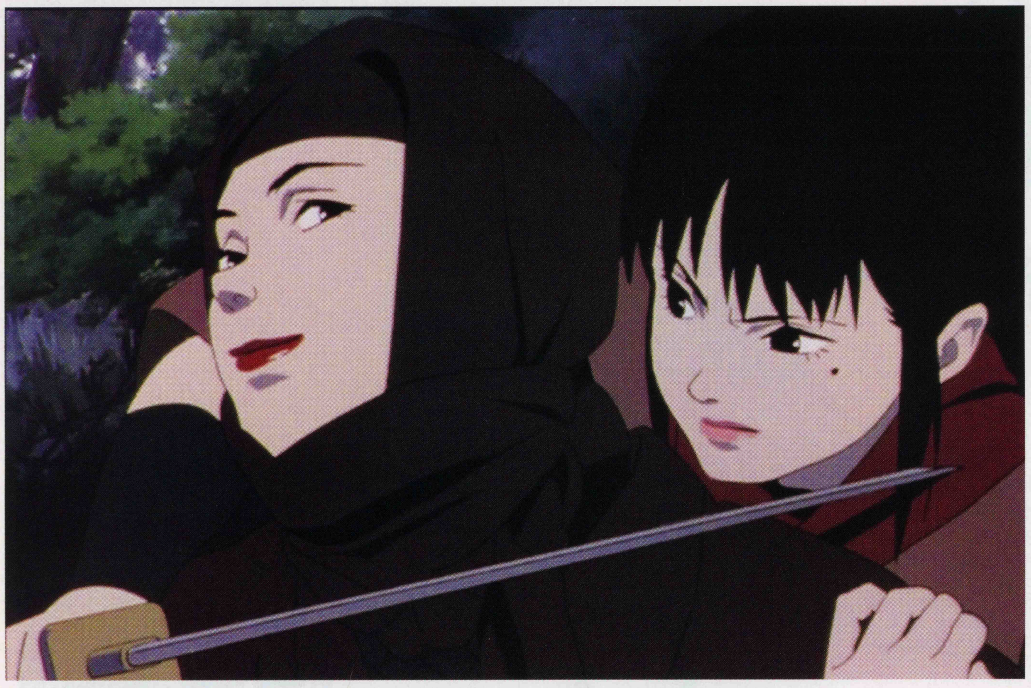
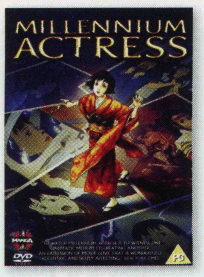


Millennium Actress

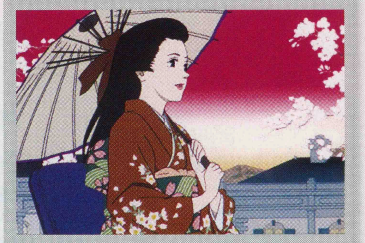


AVAILABLE: Now
LABEL: Manga
CERTIFICATE: PG
NO. OF DISCS: 1 Disc
RETAIL PRICE: £16.99
RUNNING TIME: 83mins
CREATOR: Satoshi Kon

Millennium Actress may not be Satoshi Kon's best film (we think it's a close run between *Perfect Blue* and *Paprika*) but it remains an essential classic for its sheer gutsy ambition. Taking in a thousand years of Japanese history, and around a hundred years of cinematic history, the film takes the viewer on a whirlwind tour of the life of screen idol Chiyoko Fujiwara, as she talks to reporters Genya and Kyoji. The film centres around a mysterious man she meets and helps as a young girl, and spends the rest of her life trying to track down. Chiyoko literally runs through the scenes of her many films, which parallel the history of Japan, to recapture her lost love, all the while telling her story as though the events in the film really happened to her.

The film warps reality and fiction together in a beautifully confounding mess, as we have come to expect from master director Kon. The plot weaves Chiyoko's on and offscreen history into one colourful bundle, and the audience is never sure whether Chiyoko's story is the truth. This distinctive approach to storytelling can also be seen in Kon's earlier work, *Perfect Blue*, which is hardly surprising considering that Kon collaborated with the screenwriter Sadayuki Murai on both movies. However, *Millennium Actress* keeps a sense of humour about the proceedings, generated by the two reporters, as one becomes wholly submerged in Chiyoko's fictional world, whilst the other continually expresses his disbelief at the bizarre twists and turns they are subjected to.

Given a specially commissioned dub that was recorded in the UK and was lacking from the US release, *Millennium Actress* is an animated film to watch time and time again.



Akira
Manga Entertainment, Katsuhiro Otomo

Barefoot Gen
Optimum Releasing, Keiji Nakazawa

Blood: The Last Vampire
Manga, Production I.G., Mamoru Oshii

Bubblegum Crisis
MVM, Toshimichi Suzuki

Fruits Basket
MVM, Studio DEEN, Akitaro Daichi

Fullmetal Alchemist
MVM, BONES, Hiromu Arakawa

Full Metal Panic
ADV, Gonzo, Shoji Gatoh

Ghost in the Shell
Manga Entertainment, Production I.G., Mamoru Oshii

Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex
Manga Entertainment, Production I.G., Kenji Kamiyama

Haibane Renmei
MVM, Yoshitoshi ABe

My Neighbour Totoro
Optimum Asia, Hayao Miyazaki

Neon Genesis Evangelion
ADV, GAINAX, Hideaki Anno

Paranoia Agent
MVM, Satoshi Kon

Patlabor the Movie
Beez, Studio DEEN, Mamoru Oshii

Planetes
Beez, Sunrise, Goro Taniguchi

Sailor Moon
MVM, Toei Animation, Naoko Takeuchi

Samurai 7
MVM, Gonzo, Toshifumi Takizawa

Samurai Champloo
MVM, Shinichiro Watanabe

Spirited Away
Optimum, Studio Ghibli, Hayao Miyazaki

Tenchi Muyo
MVM, Pioneer LDC, Masaki Kajishima

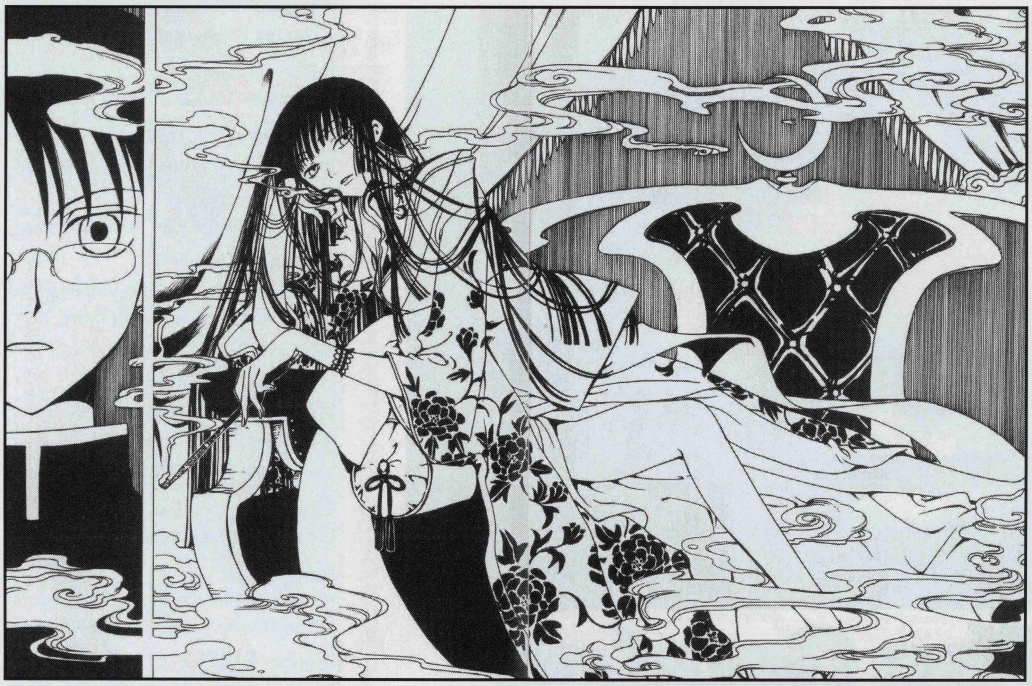
The Little Norse Prince
Optimum, Toei Animation, Isao Takahata

Urusei Yatsura
MVM, Rumiko Takahashi

Vision of Escaflowne
Beez, Bandai Visual, Shoji Kawamori

Voices of a Distant Star
ADV, Makoto Shinkai

25 ESSENTIAL... MANGA



xxxHOLiC

AVAILABLE: Now
LABEL: Tanoshimi
CERTIFICATE: 13+
NO. OF VOLS: 10+
RETAIL PRICE: £4.99
CREATOR: CLAMP

CLAMP's works can be hit or miss – saying such is sacrilege, of course, but when a group of four creators get together and then take on a heap of different projects, there's bound to be a few titles that don't quite make the grade. Take *Wish*, for example – a tepid little romance which goes nowhere and takes four volumes in which to do it. Then of course, you have *Chobits* – a total manga superstar.

xxxHOLiC is something else again – beautifully different from *Chobits* and *Wish*, leaning more towards CLAMP's gothic side, previously seen in titles like *X/1999*. It tells the story of a beautiful witch named Yûko who tricks young Watanuki into service for her in her shop. Yûko possesses powerful magic and her shop offers help to those who need it – for a price. Watanuki's nerdish, straight-laced personality contrasts

wonderfully with Yûko's laid back, seductive side – but she has another, far more serious aspect to her nature, and can transform from idle layabout to sharp witted mystic at the drop of a hat.

The series crosses over with *Tsubasa: RESERVoir CHRoNIcle*, another ongoing CLAMP series, and in the first volume Yûko grants a wish to the main characters of the other series. Throughout *xxxHOLiC*, characters from other CLAMP works visit to ask for Yûko's help – a smart move which helps to reinforce the CLAMP universe and create ample 'spot the reference' moments for fans.

The title is pronounced "holic", with the '*xxx*' part meaning to stand for whatever harmful habit takes your fancy – the characters who seek Yûko's help usually have some kind of unhealthy relationship, whether it's an addiction to the internet or an inclination to telling hugely pointless porky pies. This, coupled with the beautifully bleak and ornate illustrations, makes *xxxHOLiC* a compelling read.

Akira
Dark Horse, Katsuhiro Otomo

Appleseed
Dark Horse, Masamune Shirow

Astro Boy
Dark Horse, Osamu Tezuka

Battle Royale
TOKYOPOP, Koushin Takami

Buddha
HarperCollins, Osamu Tezuka

Chobits
TOKYOPOP, CLAMP

Cromartie High School
ADV, Eiji Nonaka

Deathnote
Viz, Tsugumi Ooba and Takeshi Obata

Dragon Ball
Gollancz, Akira Toriyama

Fruits Basket
TOKYOPOP, Natsuki Takaya

Fushigi Yugi
Gollancz, Yu Watase

Ghost in the Shell
Dark Horse, Masamune Shirow

Inuyasha
Gollancz, Rumiko Takahashi

Lone Wolf and Cub
Dark Horse, Kazuo Koike

Maison Ikkoku
Gollancz, Rumiko Takahashi

Marmalade Boy
TOKYOPOP, Wataru Yoshizumi

Mars
TOKYOPOP, Fuyumi Soryo

Monster
Viz, Naoki Urasawa

Naruto
Viz, Masashi Kishimoto

Negima
Tanoshimi, Ken Akamatsu

Peach Girl
TOKYOPOP, Miwa Ueda

Rurouni Kenshin
Gollancz, Nobuhiro Watsuki

Sgt. Frog
TOKYOPOP, Mine Yoshizaki

Tsubasa RESERVoir CHRoNIcle
Tanoshimi, CLAMP

25 ESSENTIAL... FILM ASIAN

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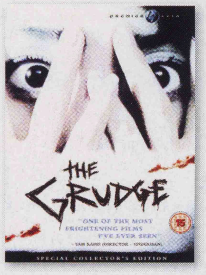
Ju-on: The Grudge



AVAILABLE: Now
LABEL: Premier Asia
CERTIFICATE: 15
NO. OF DISCS: 1 Disc
RETAIL PRICE: £19.99
RUNNING TIME: 88mins
CREATOR: Shimizu Takashi

This seminal Japanese scare-fest centres around domesticity gone horribly wrong, as a series of violent and brutal acts in an otherwise unremarkable home leave behind some ghastly echoes which in turn affect a whole cast of characters who are drawn into the horror.

Two harbingers of doom – the traditional black cat and the now clichéd spooky child (a symbol which turns the innocence and purity of childhood on its head) – stalk the scenes of the film, bringing a grisly death down upon all those who disturb their haunted home. This death usually comes in the form of the groaning, grunting corpse of a woman who was murdered for her infidelity by her jealous husband. Creeping on her stomach down stairways, along corridors, and inside people's beds, the animated corpse of Kayako stares balefully at her victims before bringing them to a gasping, terrified end.

Takashi Shimizu's *Ju-on* weaves together several key elements of horror – both from universal and specifically eastern traditions, including the typically Japanese female ghost with her long black hair and pale white face, the now ubiquitous haunted house, and the idea of a long standing curse lingering on to affect those foolish enough to disturb it.

The film was originally created as two straight to video movies, and this theatrical version of Shimizu's story was so influential that not only did Hollywood clamour for a remake, but Shimizu himself was asked to direct it – a rare move indeed.

Together with now legendary movie series that began with *Ring*, *Ju-on* stands as a classic of Japanese horror cinema, and these films have generated a ripple effect in both Asian and western popular culture that we're still feeling the effects of today.

A Better Tomorrow
Optimum Releasing, John Woo

Arahan
Optimum Releasing, Ryoo Seung-wan

Battle Royale
Tartan, Kinji Fukasaku / Takeshi Kitano

Chungking Express
Wong Kar-Wai / Tony Leung Chiu-Wai

City On Fire
Contender, Ringo Lam / Chow Yun Fat

Drunken Master
Hong Kong Legends, Yuen Wo Ping / Jackie Chan, Yuen Siu Tien, Hwang Jang Lee

Eastern Condors
Hong Kong Legends, Sammo Hung

Full Contact
Hong Kong Legends, Ringo Lam

Godzilla
BFI, Ishiro Honda / Takashi Shimura

Hana-Bi
Momentum, Takeshi Kitano / Takeshi Kitano, Kayoko Kishimoto, Ren Osugi

Heroes Two
Momentum Asia, Chang Cheh

Infernal Affairs
Tartan, Lau Wai-Keung, Mak Siu-Fai/ Tony Leung Chiu-Wai

Ju Dou
Razor Digital Entertainment, Zhang Yimou, Yang Fengliang / Gong Li, Li Baotian, Li Wei

Ong Bak
Contender Entertainment, Prachya Pinkaew, Tony Jaa

Onibaba
Eureka Entertainment, Kaneto Shindo

Prodigal Son
Hong Kong Legends, Sammo Hung / Yuen Biao, Lam Ching Ying, Frankie Chan

Project A
Hong Kong Legends, Jackie Chan

Raise the Red Lantern
Razor Digital Entertainment, Zhang Yimou

Roningai
Artsmagic, Kazuo Kuroki / Shintaro Katsu

Samurai Assassin
Artsmagic, Kihachi Okamoto / Toshiro Mifune, Michiyo Aratama, Keiju Kobayashi

Seven Samurai
BFI, Akira Kurosawa / Toshiro Mifune

Shaolin Soccer
Optimum, Stephen Chow / Stephen Chow, Ng Man Tat, Vicky Zhao

Way of the Dragon
Hong Kong Legends, Bruce Lee / Bruce Lee, Chuck Norris, Nora Miao

Yojimbo
BFI, Akira Kurosawa / Toshiro Mifune, Tatsuya Nakadai, Daisuke Kato

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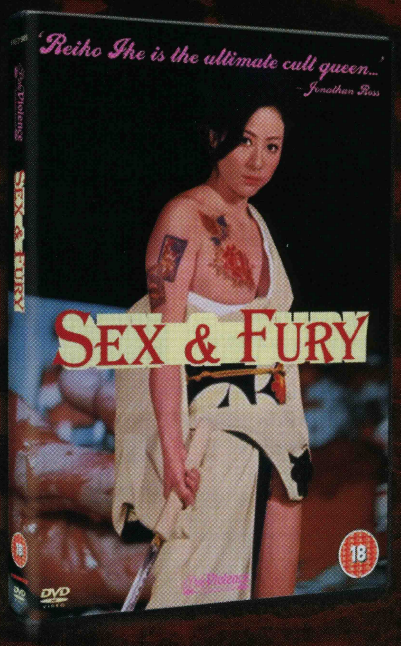

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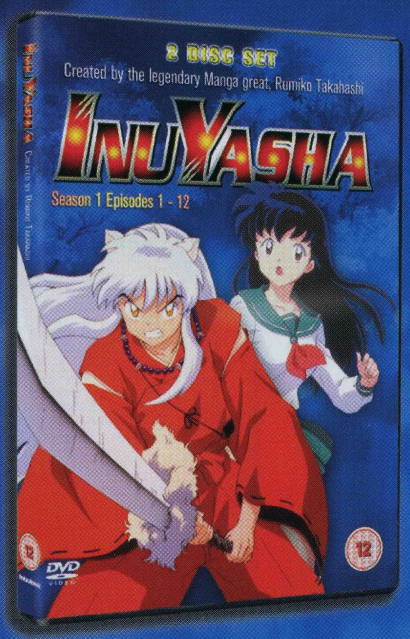

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Manga School

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SWEATDROP STUDIOS

As always, for any further information, please do head over to www.sweatdrop.com where you can share ideas on our forum, as well as see Sweatdrop's original UK manga comics!

About the Artist

Laura Watton is a freelance illustrator and comicker. She has been airsofting only once. No idea where the zombie love came from.

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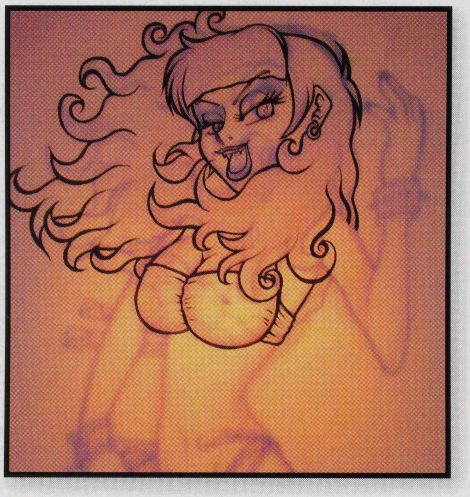
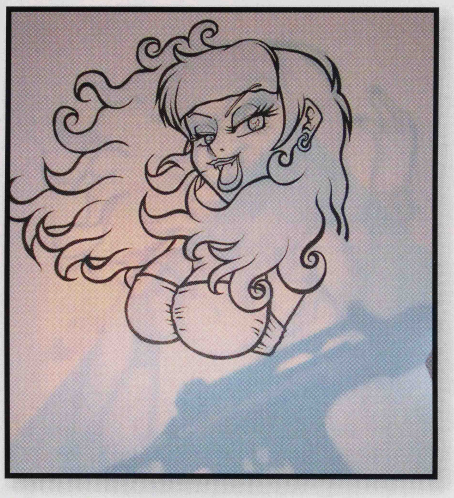
Step 1: Rough planning

Using a light shade, sketch an extremely rough version of your idea. Markers are quick to use, so churning out many sketches and ideas is easy. The green lines denote symmetry, as a symmetrical picture is more appealing to the subconscious eye.



Step 2: Solid Blacks

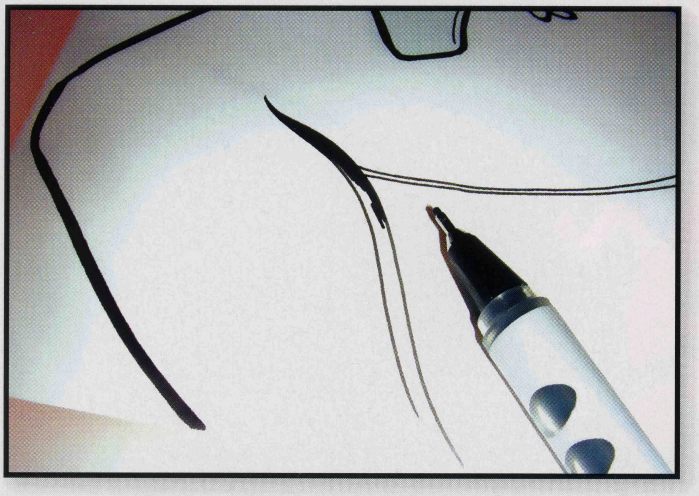
Grab a fresh sheet of marker proof paper. Ink carefully, but with a confident, non-wobbly line. Here, a 0.3mm fine liner was used around the body and for the gun; a 0.1mm pen was used for facial details. If you have decided that you do not like the original details, change them! The eyes were changed here because the original expression did not suit the character.



Step 3: References

Drawing accurate guns is hard work! For accuracy, a printed version of a G36c gun was placed underneath the top inked piece of paper. Using a ruler is recommended.

Be patient at this stage! No page of artwork by anyone is perfect, flaws will always remain, but it is important that you try your best and make it as good as you can get!



Step 4: Fine Lines

Building up lines is a useful technique to mimic brush pen line work. By making lines that taper off, artwork can be given a professional polish.

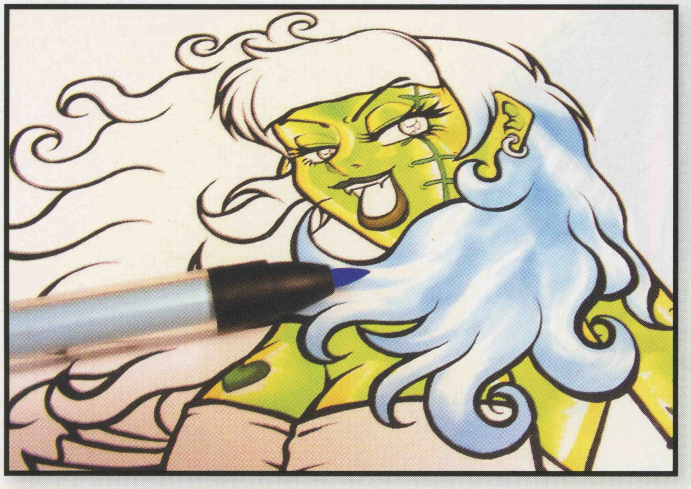
Step 5: Adding Colour

Being selective about what shades can be used is important. I outlined the figure with a yellow shade, because there is some action happening behind her. This is also emphasised by the ties and hair being whipped around to the left direction.

mangaart
colour, tone and accessories

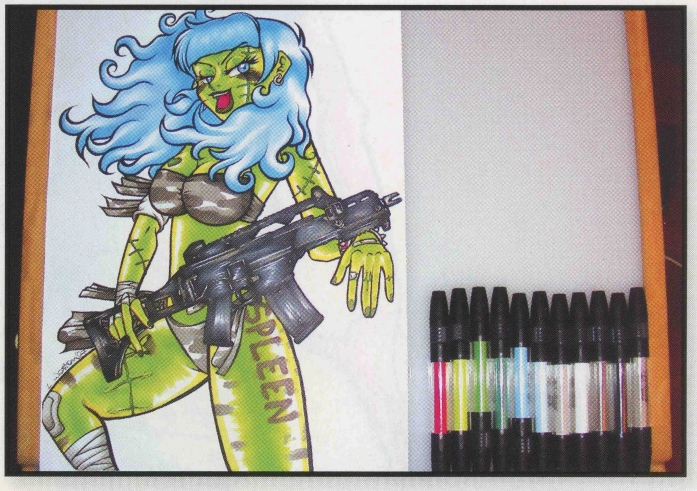
Part 19. Shonen Tria Markers by Laura Watton

Calling all budding manga artists out there! Take a seat – the class is starting.
Each issue in NEO magazine, different artists from Sweatdrop Studios will be taking you through the stages of creating a piece of artwork; From pencil sketches, through marker pieces, to full pages of manga! Each will be offering not only hints and tips on creating your own artwork, but also an insight into their own methods and techniques.
This month, Laura Watton gives a step-by-step guide on building up a knockout "boys' comic"-styled illustration, using Letraset's brand of Shonen Tria markers, Letraset fineliners and A3 markerproof paper! Pencils at the ready! Class in progress...



Step 6: Hair Shine

Anime and manga hairstyles always seem to have a glossy shine. This helps emphasise where each strand of hair is falling. Needle-pointed tips are important and Tria markers' brush pen tips help create textured hairstyles extremely easily. Use soft, curved brushstrokes.



Step 7: Camo Queen of Team Spleen

Further shading is easily added after leaving the initial ("base") colour to dry, and adding another layer or two of the same colour over the base colour layer. Cream colours were used to shade white plasters. Blacks and browns give a matt effect for the gun.

Tip

To avoid splodges and overlapping lines of colour, keep the nib on the paper so that the alcohol-based ink can spread evenly around the area you wish to colour.

Lift the pen off the paper when you wish to move on and colour a new section!

Step 8: Computer Clean-up

When you are finished and all inks are dry, you can scan your work into an art application. This is useful to neaten up edges and adding effects. You can use this clean scan over a background of your choice.

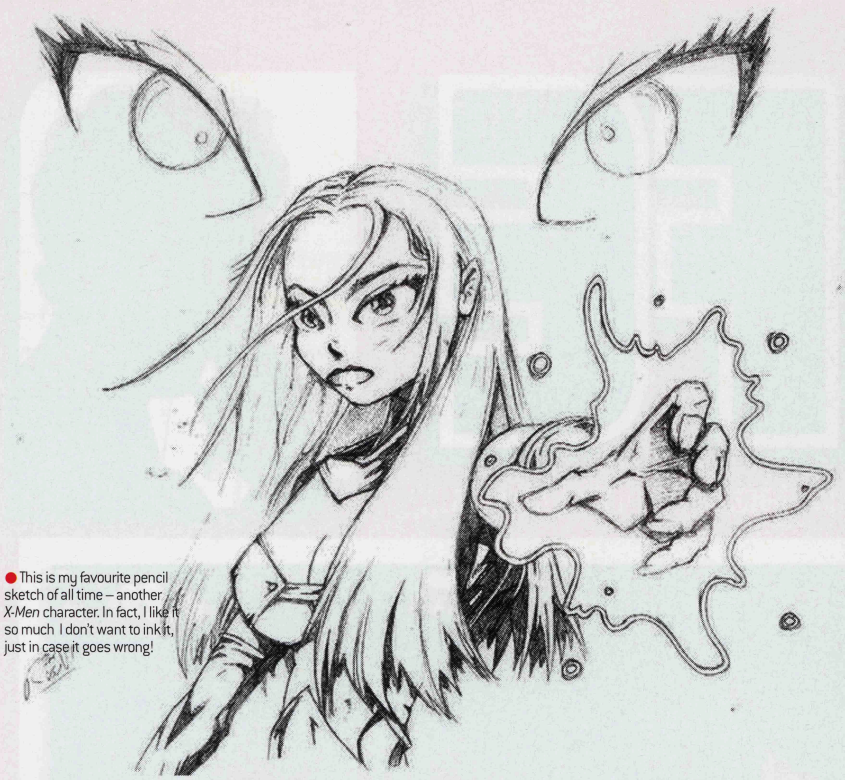
Conclusion

Practice getting to grips with marker pen techniques – it is worth it! Making dynamic manga-styled artwork has never been easier. If you are unsure of how to develop your art, why not post it online for others to give suggestions?

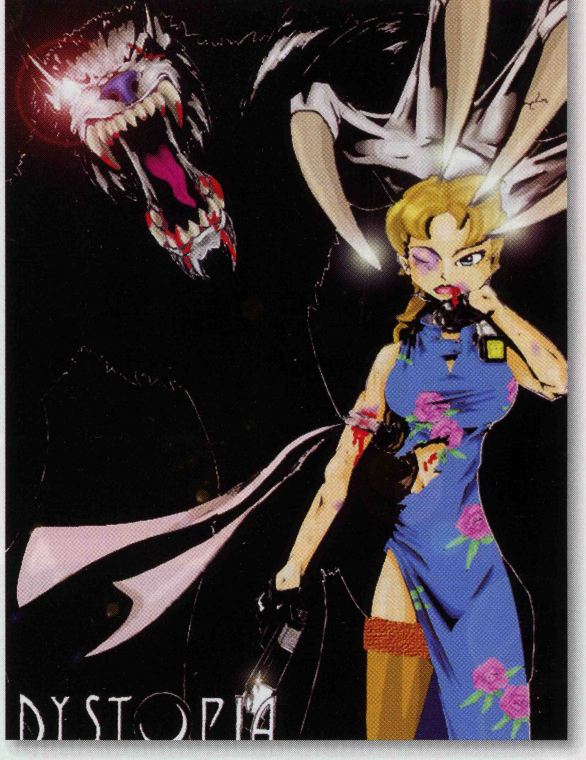
NEO ARTIST SHOWCASE

This is a sea witch from one of my mini strips *Big Bully*. Ironically she is the victim - nothing to do with the sea weed dress, honest!

If you are interested in submitting work to be featured in the NEO ARTIST SHOWCASE, please email mail@neomag.co.uk with 'ARTIST SHOWCASE' as your subject header, along with an internet link with examples of your work.



● This is my favourite pencil sketch of all time – another *X-Men* character. In fact, I like it so much I don't want to ink it, just in case it goes wrong!



The Best in Western Talent

Every issue, NEO will be showcasing the work of the UK's Asian influenced artists and illustrators

Russ D. Toole
Age: 27 years young
Based in: Bury (Manchester)
Profession: I'm an *evil* taxman

Although I can't prove this, I'm pretty sure I've been drawing since I could breathe… or at least before I could write! Since I was a kid, I've always wanted my work to be seen, and I dreamt of drawing my own comic book title. This all changed, however, when I saw *Akira* for the first time and was dragged face first into the glorious world of anime!

Now I seek to create my own comic book based on humorous short tales of various manga characters, using some tips I picked up while trying to draw in my original western style.

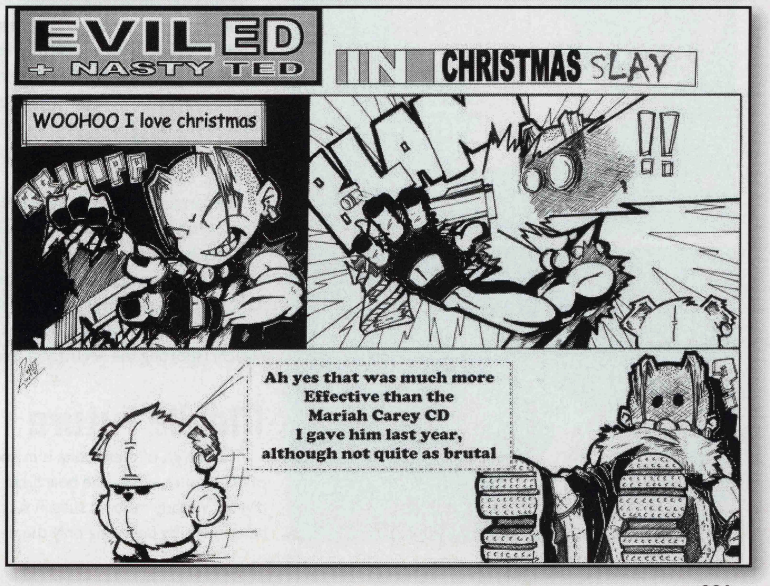
My biggest achievements so far have been a three page preview strip for a comic company in America, being one of the winners of the first ever NEO 'draw your own manga' contest and now...THIS!

To see more of my stuff check out my sites http://www.myspace.com/russ_d_toole, and my comic http://www.comicspace.com/eviledandnastyted.

Evil Ed and Nasty Ted is my main project at the moment and has been well received, so fingers crossed this will be the one to grab some attention. If you ever get the time, let me know what you think!

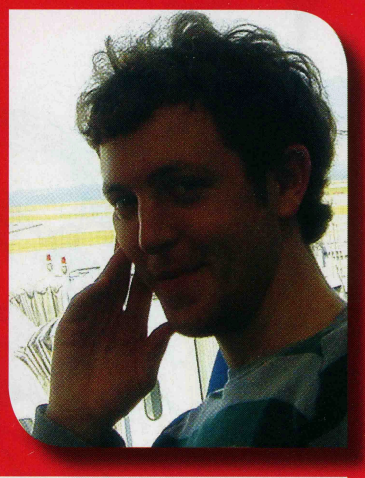
I will one day succeed in getting my very own fan base even if I have to bribe the whole lot of you!

● My version of an *X-Men* character, this drawing is part of my beloved pencil sketch collection.



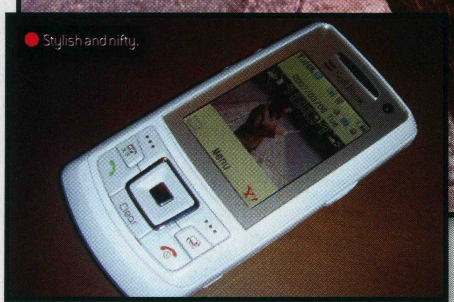
J-LIFE

Regular reports from NEO's man in Japan, Jonti Davies...

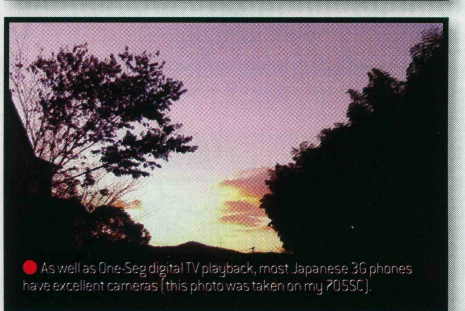


BEAR WITH ME A SEG

Mrs. Davies plays on her Panasonic 705SH.



Stylish and nifty.



As well as One-Seg digital TV playback, most Japanese 3G phones have excellent cameras (this photo was taken on my 705SC).

Softbank recently spent a great deal of money advertising with Hollywood celebrities.

I RECENTLY UPGRADED to a Samsung 705SC, which is a very nifty 3G phone (phones in Japan are fantastic, no doubt about it). The biggest sensation in Japan's mobile phone market right now is something called 'One-Seg', and it works like this.

Japan's mobile networks are teaming up with the country's TV networks to bring digital terrestrial programming into the mobile market. Analogue broadcasting of Japanese TV has been available through various mobile carriers here for the past few years. But we're now moving into the era of mobile digital TV, and the differences between the two services extend far beyond aesthetic concerns.

The format of Japan's new digital terrestrial service for mobiles has been christened One-Seg. Throughout Japan One-Seg broadcasting began in the first week of April last year. The initial range of mobile phone hardware designed for One-Seg reception came from three of Japan's leading manufacturers – Panasonic (with its p901itv model), Hitachi (sporting the w41h) and Sanyo (with the w33sa).

Mobile Future

The design of these units is in keeping with the style of 3G phones across the board, but it's worth noting that digital TV-ready mobiles sustain surprisingly extensive battery life. By decoding only the desired broadcast channel, current One-Seg models trump old analogue equipment with three hours of continuous playback (compared with, typically, just one hour of cross-channel decoded analogue on the old units).

Quality of reception, too, has been drastically enhanced with the upgrade to digital broadcasting. Programmes are streamed in MPEG4 format, running at 320x240 QVGA resolution, which is the same resolution used by most Japanese 3G phones.

Users of the service presently can watch the same digital terrestrial programming as TV subscribers enjoy at home – and, at least while providers assess their options, this service is free of charge. The seven channels from Nippon Television, Fuji Television and TV Asahi provide a range of news, sport, drama, comedy, light entertainment and cartoons. Being tied to schedules designed for home viewing, however, is not likely to be mobile digital's long-term role.

As well as a mainline of TV programming, providers can utilise One-Seg to stream other information digitally to mobile users. Already news and weather streams are provided alongside digital broadcasts, keeping viewers informed as they view TV content.

The potential for interactive features and simultaneously streamed advertising is undoubtedly huge. For me, it's all just another bundle of reasons to live in Japan. Anyone jealous yet?

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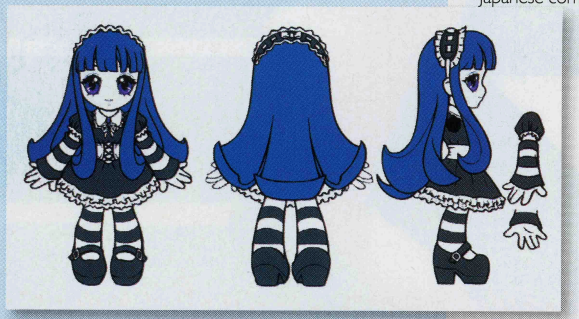
Letters

Topics of conversation this issue: the Oriental City development, the talents of Niki Hunter and Jonathan Clements, and live action Ghost in the Shell. As always, keep your letters coming to: NEO Letters, NEO, Uncooked Media, B10 Arena Business Centre, Poole, BH17 7BA, or email mail@neomag.co.uk This month, the star letter will receive a £50 gift card from HMV. Snazzy!

● Niki Hunter's portfolio is hugely impressive – we featured her artwork in NEO 030.



Compliments to the Clements

I am writing in to just give my compliments to Mr. Jonathan Clements, for his brilliant series of articles on The History of Manga, and also the awesome magazine he highlighted in NEO 029 in his Manga Snapshot article.

Seriously, the points he highlighted were just great in his last article of the History of Manga series, I really agree with the points he made about how unfortunately manga is becoming less creative and more corporate in Japan, and I think it's important for other people to see this side of manga… So many people read this very uncreative, mediocre, unemotional and unoriginal manga which is very popular, but ruining the potential of comics, and thinking there is not anything more to manga, when there is so much more (which has been pointed out in earlier issues of History of Manga).

But then Mr. Clements showed in his Manga Snapshots article the wonderful variety of comics that Japan has... the creativity that has gone into these modern comics, the variety of drawing styles and stories... this truly shows what Japanese comics are capable of, and why comics from Japan are so great. It's the fact that Japan sees potential and creativity in the comic format, that they respect this format enough to try out all kinds of genres for all ages, and input their own experiences and cultures, not that of superheroes, into their comics, that makes me love Japanese comics so much… and it is something that Mr. Jonathan Clements highlighted very well in his articles. Thank you Mr. Clements!

Bex Burgess, via email

Niki Hunter

Thank you for opening my eyes to the amazing artwork of Niki Hunter (NEO 030). The woman is a truly talented artist and she even made the character artwork for the wonderful *Sudeki*. Anyone who hasn't checked out her website: SHAME ON YOU.

It's great to see the visual-kei style finally coming to the UK and hopefully it will open the door for more fans. I would personally love to see a visual-kei styled metal band from the UK, or have the fashion world taken by storm (how cool would it be to see gothic Lolita outfits taking over the catwalk?)

Anyway thanks again NEO! Please tell us *Karas* has a fixed release date this month!

Adam White, via email

Sorry Adam – at the time of print there's still no word on *Karas*. And even if there were, don't forget that release dates are always slipping.

Pokémon Shame

I would like to thank you for getting me back into anime. This was mainly due to your December issue on *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. *Evangelion* has been one of my favourite anime series for some time, but I never got round to buying it on DVD while I was at college.

After reading the review on the DVD boxset I went out and bought it, along with the double film boxset and I had forgotten how good it was and why I liked it, because generally I am a fan of the long series which I know not everyone is. Also I am not ashamed (but should be) to admit I have watched *Pokémon* and *Digimon*. By sharing this fact I've got a few laughs, mainly at my expense, from people thinking how could I stoop so low as to watching them? But *Pokémon* is still going with a new season just starting ten years or so after it first aired.

Anyway, you have reviewed and mentioned *Naruto* over the last few issues and I took your advice and got both boxsets, and instantly saw why it is so popular. But my question is: when will more boxsets be released in the UK? Also is Manga Entertainment looking at releasing the films too? And if so when?

David Percival, via email

There are more *Naruto* boxes, one in May and the next in August – see page 014 for our exclusive announcement

Star Letter

WRITE OUR STAR LETTER AND YOU WILL BAG A £50 HMV GIFT CARD

Yaohan Plaza

I just wanted to say, "Oi! Oriental City developers – NO!!" When I saw your article on the closure of Yaohan Plaza (now Oriental City) in your February issue, I could stay silent no longer. On my last visit to this wonderful place I was horrified to learn that the new owners plan (and have been backed by the Council) to close it for two years, forcing out all the shop owners, while they build a "new and improved" development that includes a hardware superstore, a gym and a GP surgery. In other words, turning the centre from cultural haven into barren wasteland.

Oriental City has for many years been a Mecca for fans of Japanese/Oriental culture, housing the most delightful shops you've ever seen – Oriental dresses, authentic crockery to eat your sushi off and a supermarket full of bizarre Japanese delights (banana flavoured crisps anyone?). It contains a truly legendary food court which boasts any type of Oriental food you can possibly think of, plus an arcade, restaurants and loads of stalls selling a huge variety of quirky knick knacks.

Even more importantly, Oriental City acts as a focal point for the Oriental communities that are prevalent around the area, hosting festival celebrations, children's martial arts classes and providing a general meeting area. Having spoken with several Oriental City shop owners, I can tell that they are not hopeful about finding a place to come back to once the building work is complete, or even finding a suitable replacement location in the meantime. It will be a near impossible task for all the current store owners to set up shop somewhere together, which is the main draw of the current set-up.

Why is it that in our multi-ethnic population, such an important cultural site is being obliterated to make way for more big name chain stores? Once again it is proved that making huge wads of cash is the most important consideration to the people with power. If I must resign myself to the very real possibility of this catastrophe going ahead, the least I can do is urge all NEO readers to visit Oriental City (in Collindale, North West London) and spend a wonderful day soaking up its unique and charming atmosphere while they still have the chance.

Perhaps NEO would consider running an article showing exactly what it is Britain will be missing out on once Oriental City is gone? Surely there is something there to appeal to all.

Elizabeth Simpson, via email

Thanks very much for your fantastic letter, Elizabeth. We don't have a piece planned on Yaohan, but we do urge NEO readers to check it out before it's lost.

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When will the second part of *Karas* get a UK release? Even we don't know.

about the *Naruto* Cosplay Party to celebrate the launch of series two of *Naruto Unleashed*. NEO contacted Manga about the films, but it couldn't confirm anything as of yet.

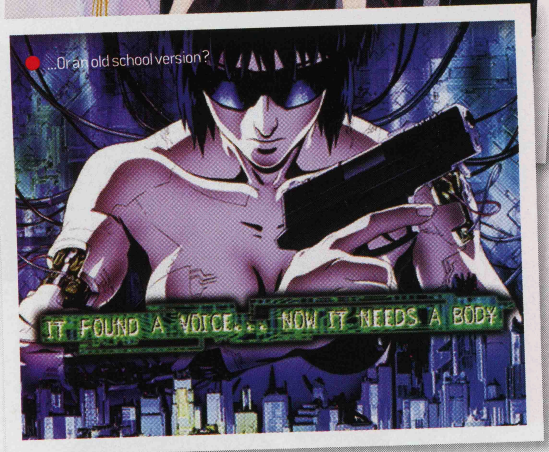
Judgemental? Moi?

Well first off, thank you for printing such a brilliant magazine and providing me with lots of reviews. Now on to my main point. Why! How could they even think of turning *Ghost in the Shell* into a live action film? My reasons are 1) Batou would look stupid. 2) I can't see anyone pulling of the role as the Major. 3) It would lessen the manga and anime versions. 4) Unless they're really careful the special effects would look cheesy. So in conclusion, I'm strongly against a live action version, but would still watch it then pass judgment.

Raymond Saunders, via email

For those not in the know, Japanese animation company Production I.G. has acquired the rights to sell *GITS* for a live-action remake. It's nice to know some are reserving their judgment until they've actually watched the film! There are no details on casting as yet, but we're fascinated to see who'll get cast as the Major.

Will the live action *Ghost in the Shell* movie feature a new Major...?



...Or an old school version?

NEO HOT TOPIC

Mature anime

Should anime fans shy away from purchasing mature anime like *La Blue Girl* or *Overfiend* in an effort to discourage production and avoid negative publicity, or should we promote anime as a medium that covers all genres and just be proud of the tentacles?

GRCC
For no apparent reason other than ignorance, anime doesn't seem to be allowed to portray sex and violence without the tabloids pitching in their tuppence, despite it being around for years and society still being intact.

Arkayen
Tolerance has changed so much in recent years. If you flashed a knee 100 years ago, you were a tart. Give it another few years and *Battle Royale* may be the Toonami movie.

Chyna
What annoys me is the double standards of this country – it's okay for *Saw* and other things to be uncut and have gratuitous sex, but when it's anime, it's completely wrong, disgusting, sick.

wolf-bear
I think that all mature titles should be placed in the Adult section. If I was unfamiliar with anime and saw something like *La Blue Girl* on the shelf, my reaction would be, "Eww, cartoon porn," and be put off for life.

Mohawk52
We had this problem only six years ago and I don't want that to ever happen again. Anything of a mature adult sexual nature should be shrink wrapped and clearly labelled adults only, and only available when asked for.

The Time Traveller
People go on and on about how perverted manga and anime is. What about French comics? I got a French comic once, tits on nearly every page, the comic was rated for children.

This is just a sampling of the quality discussions that are going on over at the official NEO mag forum. Get in on the action and interact at www.neomag.co.uk

QUICK POLL

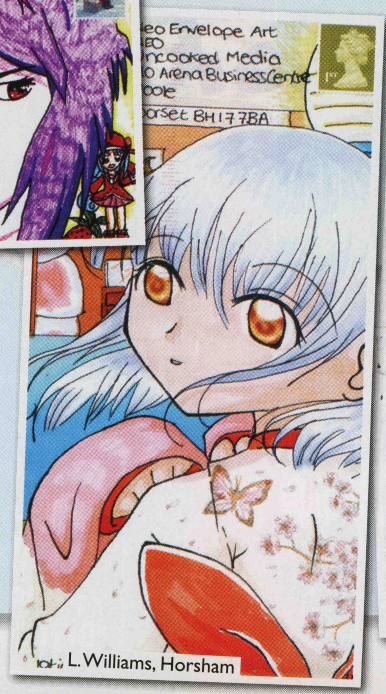
The mature stuff?

SOURCE: www.neomag.co.uk

Candice, Kingston upon Thames

Envelope Art

If you want to join in and contribute your envelope art, simply decorate an envelope, write your name and town of residence on the back and send it to: NEO Envelope Art, NEO, Uncooked Media Ltd., B10 Arena Business Centre, Poole, Dorset, BH17 7BA. Please note that we are unable to return your envelope entries.



L. Williams, Horsham

Laura Evans, Kempsey

Thu Tran, London

NEXT ISSUE

Elemental Gelade

NEO takes a look at this multi-format fantasy series and uncovers a world of sky pirates, magical powers and paradise

Plus:

Going to Japan
Find out what happens when NEO is set loose in Tokyo

Le Chevalier D'Eon
Historical mystery thriller it may be, but how much of ADV's new series is true to life? Helen McCarthy investigates

Ken Akamatsu
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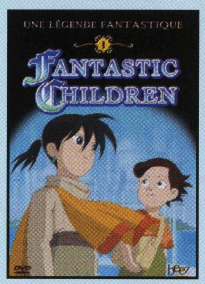

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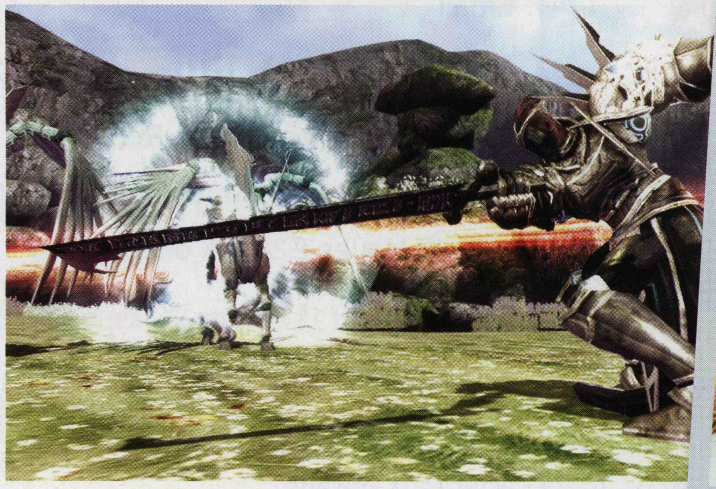
Win!

A PlayStation 3 console and a copy of *Enchanted Arms*



IF THERE'S ONE THING that's wrong with the PlayStation 3, it's the price. But what could be cheaper than free? Free? That's right – free! If you win our competition prize this month, you could be laughing all the way down to your local Gamestation and back again in the knowledge that you have one of the most powerful games consoles in the entire world, and you didn't pay a penny. And then you can go home and shove in a copy of *Enchanted Arms*, laugh a bit more, and have a good old-fashioned gaming session.

Thanks to Ubisoft, we have one shiny PS3 and a copy of *Enchanted Arms* to give away to one jammy sod, plus four more copies of the game for runners up. *Enchanted Arms*, available on both the PS3 and Xbox 360, is the one of the next generation's first traditional RPG games. You play Atsuma, who apart from having one violet eye and one green eye, is also fairly dim and has a tendency to act first and think later. Atsuna's home, Yokohama City, is destroyed by the Queen of Ice, the 'Devil Golem', and in order to avenge the loss of his city and stop the evil Queen, he must embark on a quest – and predictably, it's you who has to do all the hard work. Typical!

In order to fight evil, you must make use of the game's many Golems, which you can hunt down, or build and customise. There are over 100 varieties of these Golems, and they're used as support characters during battles. You can also use the PS3's motion sensors to solve puzzles, and the PS3 version has exclusive cinematics, new missions and additional environments that you won't find in the Xbox game.

To win our grand prize of a PS3 console and a copy of *Enchanted Arms*, answer the following question

What is the name of the lead character?

A) Toya
B) Atsuna
C) Queen of Ice

If you think you know the answer, call our competition line now on:

0906 30 80 955*

*calls cost 50p per minute: the average call lasts 90 secs. Make sure you have the bill payer's permission before calling the competition line.

Closing date: 01 May '07

Alternatively, you can enter by sending the correct answer on the back of a postcard, along with your address, to the Uncooked Media editorial address printed on page 005. Please address it to: NEO 31 Enchanted Arms Competition.

TERMS AND CONDITIONS:
No correspondence will be entered into. No employees of Uncooked Media or the companies providing the prizes may enter. No cash alternative is offered to these prizes. Entries are only valid if they reach us by the closure date. Multiple entries will be disregarded. The publisher's decision is final. Good luck!

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